

Advisory Committee On Consumers in Vulnerable Circumstances

Minutes of meeting, Meeting 3, 21/03/2024, 9.30am – St Vincent Plaza, Glasgow

Attendees

- Angela Morgan, Chair (Board, Consumer Scotland)
- Nick Martin (Board, Consumer Scotland) - joined remotely
- Karen Nailen (Chief Executive, West Lothian Citizens Advice Bureau) - joined remotely
- Aaliya Seyal (Chief Executive Officer, Legal Services Agency)
- Twimukye Macline Mushaka (Representing herself)
- Chris Birt (Joseph Rowntree Foundation)
- John McKendrick (Glasgow Caledonian University)
- Kirsten Urquhart (Young Scot)
- Artemis Pana (Scottish Rural Action) - joined remotely
- Tracey Reilly (Head of Consumer Markets, Consumer Scotland)
- David Eiser (Director of Research & Analysis, Consumer Scotland)
- Jane Williams (Head of Research, Consumer Scotland)
- David Jackson, Minutes (Policy and Advocacy Officer, Consumer Scotland)
- Sally Sandground (Corporate Services – Minutes)

Apologies

- Kendal Morris (SP Energy Networks)

Agenda Item 1: Arrival

Agenda Item 2: Welcome and Introductions

1. The Chair welcomed members to the third meeting of the Advisory Committee on Consumers in Vulnerable Circumstances.
2. The Chair introduced the Committee to the Updates Log which will be used to track issues and actions covered over the course of committee meetings. The update log

will allow members to track progress and receive updates on issues that have previously been considered. Going forward, it is intended that the agenda will have a blend of strategic and operational issues. We will continue to adapt and improve approaches as the Committee develops.

3. The minutes of the previous Committee meeting held on 5 December 2023 were approved.
4. David Eiser was introduced to the Committee and he explained the role of Directorate of Research, Analysis and Investigations and how they manage externally commissioned and inhouse research. He also outlined the development of the Consumer Welfare Report. This structure allows the team to work with policy areas across the organisation to ensure our work is underpinned with robust research and evidence.

Agenda Item 3: Updates Log

5. Item 1: Work Programme Consultation – Having published our draft Work Programme, the feedback we have received has informed the final Work Programme. We received around 30 responses and had positive feedback especially with regards to proposed work on vulnerability, disabled consumers and work around compound disadvantages. The Work Programme links with our Performance Framework and will be laid before parliament week commencing 25th March 2024. Action: a link to the published work programme will be sent to members once available
6. Item 2: Statement on Work and Advocacy for Consumers in Vulnerable Circumstances - Following Committee feedback this has been reviewed and updated, and **will be brought back to the Committee in June.**
7. Item 3: Affordability and Social Tariffs - Work continues across Consumer Scotland in relation to tariff design and affordability. Analysis of water affordability issues to

inform future affordability policy is being finalised and will be presented to Scottish Water and Scottish Government in April. Ongoing work on energy affordability will, in the short term, be framed by Ofgem's current Call for Evidence on affordability and debt (closing mid-May). Consumer Scotland's ongoing work comparing approaches to affordability across a range of markets (primarily water, energy, post and telecoms), which the Committee was informed of at its previous meeting, is nearing completion and **will be shared with the Committee in advance of the June meeting.**

Agenda Item 4: Principles for undertaking research and engagement with consumers in vulnerable circumstances

8. Jane Williams spoke about the "Draft Principles for undertaking research and engagement with consumers in vulnerable circumstances" developed by the Research and Analysis Team.
9. The Committee discussed a range of issues including:
 - the importance of working appropriately with communities, by taking a person-centred approach, based on dignity and respect for individuals
 - using consistent language, being transparent about the purpose and outcomes of research, ensuring informed participation
 - ensuring appropriate recognition and safeguarding of participants.
 - avoiding duplication in research and reducing the risk of consultation fatigue for participants
10. The Committee agreed the draft set out a thorough and ethical framework which would guide the conduct of future research. **The Committee was invited to provide further comments before a final version is completed.**

Agenda Item 5: Scotland's transition to Voice Over Internet Protocol (VoIP) calling

11. Tracey Reilly spoke to recent Consumer Scotland work on the transition to Voice Over Internet Protocol (VoIP) calling. A number of risks of moving from the current landline system to digital calling were highlighted, including concerns about

resilience, rural communities and consumers in vulnerable circumstances, including those with health conditions or telecare devices.

12. The Committee expressed concern about the lack of public awareness about this transition especially given the timescales for implementation which are for 2024/2025.

13. Discussion focussed around the need for better information from government and telecoms providers, the impact of digital exclusion, issues arising from increased interconnectedness of services and how to improve resilience.

14. Consumer Scotland will continue to work on this issue, engaging with the regulator, providers, consumer bodies and Governments to ensure plans for migration take account of consumers most affected.

Agenda Item 6: Roundup of Consumer Scotland work with vulnerable consumers since the previous meeting

15. Tracey Reilly summarised the Update Paper for the Committee on aspects of Consumer Scotland's recent work which have touched on vulnerability issues across multiple workstreams and is designed to provide a short summary of our work carried out between Committee meetings.

16. Artemis Pana (SRA) noted her recent experience of responding to a consultation on water issues and **Consumer Scotland agreed to further discuss this with SRA following the meeting.**

Agenda Item 7: AOB / Next Steps

17. AOB – None

18. Next meeting set for Tuesday 18th June 9.30-12.30, Thistle House Edinburgh.

19. John McKendrick (Glasgow Caledonian University) noted a potential conflict of interest in relation to Item 8 and left the meeting before this Item was discussed.

Agenda Item 8: Approaching Research on the Experiences of Disabled Consumers living in Rural and Island communities in Scotland

20. David Jackson presented information on a proposed future Consumer Scotland research project exploring the experiences of disabled consumers and people living with health conditions in rural and Island communities in Scotland.

21. The following discussion included consideration of which markets and characteristics could be looked at, gaps in existing research, and the need to ensure the results of any research were impactful and proposed affordable solutions. Members suggested a number of areas in which there were concerns about structural issues in markets, especially around access and affordability. Members highlighted a range of useful contacts along with existing research which could be drawn on in developing this work.