

## **Consumer Focus and the AJTC – a personal view of the synergies ...**

My dog, Rosie, hadn't shown much interest in either tribunals or consumer affairs prior to the day last spring when I joined both the Welsh Committee of the Administrative Justice and Tribunals Council and the Board of Consumer Focus Wales within a week of each other. Now, however, she cannot wait for the next forest of trees to be delivered by the poor postman (of whose work I now have some oversight through Consumer Focus) and I have had to fit a new, larger, letter box to save him from ringing the door bell nearly everyday and initiating a welcoming torrent of barking. My worries of how I would fill time in my new state of semi-retirement are over, and my struggle now is to read it all, and to look for the ways it all links together.

Readers of Adjust will be familiar with the work of the AJTC and so the purpose of this short article is to explain the relevance of the work of Consumer Focus, and identify some of the possible links between the two.

Consumer Focus is the new national consumer champion, launched in October from a merger of the National Consumer Council, Energywatch and Postwatch. Consumer Focus Wales, of which I am a Board Member, is similarly formed from a bringing together of the responsibilities of the Welsh Consumer Council, Energywatch Wales and Postwatch Wales. However, the new organisation is charged with far more responsibility than just taking over the work of the predecessor bodies.

As the new work programme puts it, "Consumer Focus builds on the work of its predecessors. ...Our policy and campaigns will create synergies across sectors which were not possible before. For, instance, the role of post offices can be looked at in the wider context of sustainable communities, and energy issues can be set in the wider context of climate change and sustainable development."

As well as post and energy, the new organisation is developing a series of advocacy programmes around disadvantage (promoting and protecting the needs of consumers who are disadvantaged by health, disability, income, age or location – with an initial focus on fuel poverty), sustainability, community and public services, and open markets. New powers allow Consumer Focus to promote change by investigating a small number of complaints that have wider significance, and handle complaints on behalf of particularly vulnerable energy and post consumers.

In order to achieve a fair deal for consumers, four strategic campaign goals have been identified:

- Value – help people to obtain better value by raising the influence they have over the goods and services they receive.
- Service – improve customer service and remove unnecessary problems that generate complaints from consumers.
- Access – create an economy in which everyone can access the essential services they need, and where the poor no longer pay more or get less for their money.
- Sustainability – harness the appetite of consumers to adopt more sustainable lifestyles.

Consumer Focus is not an advice agency, or a regulator. Initial advice and complaints about post and energy issues will be handled by Consumer Direct, (08454 04 50 06) the government sponsored consumer advice telephone service, but queries from vulnerable consumers will then be passed on to the Consumer Focus Extra Help Unit based in Glasgow.

Given the focus of the AJTC is to keep under review the work of the administrative justice and tribunal system **from the point of view of the user** there are clearly overlaps in approach between the two organisations – one person's tribunal user is, after all, another person's consumer of public services.

Early work in both organisations has involved drawing up future work programmes, and it has been of particular interest to me that both the AJTC's Welsh Committee and Consumer Focus Wales have recognised at this early stage the importance of access to good advice services in helping to create a society where people are empowered to make decisions about their own lives. Both organisations have built into their work programmes the need to better understand the existing provision of advice services across Wales, and will take a keen interest in the impact of the changes currently being implemented in the commissioning of such services. Wales has always had an underfunded advice sector when compared to other parts of the UK, and whilst considerable progress has been made in recent years, there are still significant gaps in provision and little real coordinated planning and funding.

Having spent my working life in the provision, planning and funding of advice services in Wales I am relieved to know that I will have some particular knowledge and experience to contribute to at least one of the items on the agenda of future meetings in both organisations! And when the relevant papers start coming through the door, Rosie will too!

Bob Chapman