



Title: Citizens Advice: Securing a better deal for consumers: The Citizens Advice draft consumer work plan 2017/18.

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1. Who we are and what we do?

- 1.1 The Consumer Council is a non-departmental public body (NDPB) established through the General Consumer Council (Northern Ireland) Order 1984. Our principal statutory duty is to promote and safeguard the interests of consumers in Northern Ireland (NI).
- 1.2 The Consumer Council has specific statutory duties in relation to energy, postal services, transport, and water and sewerage. These include considering consumer complaints and enquiries, carrying out research and educating and informing consumers.

2 The Citizens Advice draft consumer work plan 2017/18

- 2.1 The Consumer Council is pleased to be able to offer comments on Citizens Advice draft consumer work plan 2017/18. We believe the draft consumer work plan demonstrates a comprehensive approach with exceptional clarity of purpose.
- 2.2 Following review of the draft consumer work plan we have no suggestions for additional work streams or areas to deprioritise. Indeed a number of the work areas outlined mirrors the Consumer Council's 2017/18 projects. We would therefore extend an invitation to work together to determine if areas of common and mutual interest can be discovered. We feel a joined up approach could work in the best interests of all UK wide consumers.

- 2.3 We are particularly keen to provide specific mention on a number of key projects outlined in the draft consumer work plan, which we feel could be of mutual benefit through closer working and sharing of information.
- 2.4 The Consumer Council undertakes extensive research in our areas of statutory responsibility. We also undertake a bi-annual consumer outlook survey which tracks consumers' attitudes and behaviour to the key consumer issues, like affordability, financial security and consumer confidence in the economy. This research may be of particular interest for Citizens Advice's cross-sector work in 'Promoting consumer interests in a changing world'.
- 2.5 Turning to the post work plan - as one of the three UK Postal Consumer Advocacy Bodies, the Consumer Council works particularly closely with Citizens Advice and Citizens Advice Scotland on a number of reserved postal issues.
- 2.6 Going forward, and with the particular focus on postal advocacy funding, the Consumer Council would again repeat its willingness to work with Citizens Advice on a number of projects. Historically, following the legacy of Consumer Futures, the Consumer Council has always enjoyed a strong working relationship with Citizens Advice's Post Team. This is something we are keen to maintain and develop in the future.

2.7 This joined up approach will make both of our organisations more effective, provide greater results for postal consumers and generate a greater opportunity to provide value for money in all activities.

2.8 We are aware that colleagues in all of the UK Consumer Advocacy Bodies have already started discussions regarding project synergies for 2017/18 and we would encourage this approach going forward. In particular and specifically we have a number of project synergies in areas such as:

Tackling Postal Scams

- Convening a task force
- Reducing the number of consumers falling victim to mail scams.

Standing up for rural areas and older people

- Improving the experience of rural consumers of postal services now and in the future across Scotland, Wales and England.
- Ensuring that all Post Office branch changes receive robust consumer scrutiny and that access is maintained for all consumers.

Fighting for clearer and affordable prices

- Preventing consumers from paying more than they need for postal services due to a lack of transparency in pricing structures.

- Ensuring that key mail services are affordable and meet the needs of disabled consumers.

Promoting the interests in a changing world

- Understanding the likely impact of future market developments on consumers.
- Ensuring that the protection and rights of postal consumers are not diluted as the UK leaves the European Union.

Representing postal consumers

- Contributing to all key debates and consultation responses.

2.9 These areas all feature strongly in the Consumer Council's work plan. By working together we can present a UK wide view on these issues and add more strength to advocating for all UK postal consumers.

3 Conclusion

3.1 The Consumer Council welcomes the important work of Citizens Advice across the UK, and we look forward to exploring synergies between our organisations and continuing to working well with our Citizens Advice colleagues in the year ahead.



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