



1. Foreword

The establishment and development of North Ayrshire Consumer Support Network (CSN) followed on from the Government's strategy on modern markets and informed confident consumers.

As the first CSN to be registered with the DTI in Scotland, North Ayrshire CSN has developed excellent partnership working with all Advice Agencies in our area. The CSN has been further supported by other Services or Agencies who provide training, education and support to ensure the success of our CSN.

Community involvement is key to ensuring that our CSN can make a difference by providing guidance locally on how various advice agencies can help and ensure the best course of action is taken no matter what the problem or complaint is. Consumer rights, welfare rights and debt or money advice information and assistance is freely available from a range of specialist sources. Contact can be made directly with the appropriate Agency or via first point of contact locations throughout North Ayrshire in local Libraries, Local Offices where both information and assistance is available.

2. The Vision

The vision is a simple one: to improve consumer access to expert, accurate and timely advice.

Access to good quality consumer advice varies enormously across the country. The 1999 Audit Commission report on Trading Standards, 'Measure for Measure', said: "In one part of the country, a consumer with a problem may receive considerable advice and help but elsewhere someone with an identical problem may receive no assistance at all." They might eventually find a body that offers advice, but it might not be easy to get to. Or it might open for only a few hours a week. Or it may be hard to reach by phone. Or it may be all of these.

People also need to be able to access advice in different ways. Some want to have face-to-face contact with an adviser. Some are happy to receive help on the phone. Some have embraced new technology and welcome access via e-mail or web sites - while others still find the prospect daunting.

Some of those consumers with greatest needs are the most difficult to help. People with disabilities may find it difficult to visit remote premises. The economically disadvantaged may have little or no access to Internet advice. Some may be unaware of, or unwilling to use, telephone services.

There is clearly room for improvement, but rarely is a single agency able to meet all the needs of its community. By joining up the services of local authority and voluntary advice

agencies, we are starting to meet the diverse needs of today's consumers. Local Trading Standards, Citizens Advice Bureaux (CABx) and independent consumer advice agencies across Great Britain have come together to form Consumer Support Networks (CSNs).

Consumer advice agencies within the network must be able to guarantee their competence. This is achieved by means of certification within a recognised quality scheme, such as the Community Legal Service Quality Mark. As a group CSN members work together to ensure that good quality consumer advice is accessible by the whole community. Agencies within the network that achieve quality are awarded the CSN badge. The badge is a sign that an agency provides sound advice and that it operates as part of a joined-up service.

3. Aims

Consumer Support Networks:

- give consumers access to expert, accurate and timely advice
- encourage a customer-focused approach with services easier to access and targeted at local needs
- encourage advice agencies to measure their performance, continuously improve their services and provide good value by making best use of their resources
- create a trading environment in which consumers become more knowledgeable and confident in exercising their rights
- facilitate the sharing of experiences and the spread of good practice amongst advice providers.

What do Consumer Support Networks do?

The network ensures that whenever people seek help - whether they need simple information or advice, mediation or even support in the courts - they are able to approach any of the agencies within it and receive the right help.

Networks:

- develop the trust and understanding that underpins effective co-operation
- jointly develop a plan to meet any gaps between what they supply, and what the community needs
- support each other's training and information needs
- provide a link between consumer complaints and enforcement functions
- promote the network's services to other advice providers and to consumers
- secure wider support for the network (for example from local businesses).

Who is included in the networks?

At the core of the networks are the agencies that provide free consumer advice:

- local authority providers (generally working through the Trading Standards teams)
- the CABx
- local independent advisers.

The network has effective links with gateway agencies to parts of the community that may be difficult to reach, e.g. Age Concern and agencies supporting minority groups, and with other advice services, such as debt, housing and welfare rights. Local businesses and business organisations such as Chambers of Commerce may also be involved, for example through promotion of fair trading schemes.

The North Ayrshire CSN comprises:

Trading Standards Social Work – Welfare & Debt Advice Community Learning & Development Library Services Local Offices Ethnic Minorities Officer Police Liaison Officer North Ayrshire Citizens Advice Services Age Concern Kilmarnock In Court Advice Service 1st Alliance Credit Union

What do we mean by consumer advice?

Consumer advice needs to reflect today's marketplace. It must take account of developments such as Internet shopping and the often complicated ways that goods and services are sold in the UK and elsewhere.

Advice is practical and covers:

- what to look out for when buying goods and services
- consumers' rights and obligations when buying goods and services
- how to obtain redress when things go wrong.

4. Benefits

Quality assurance, clear branding and effective promotion of the local network, and the agencies within it, helps people know where to go for advice on consumer issues. Improved understanding of roles within the network and better referral systems help ensure that people are passed quickly to the best source of advice and help, whichever part of the network they first approach.

There are also benefits for those funding and delivering consumer advice. Local authorities and other funders have the confidence that CSN agencies are well-run organisations delivering effective services and offering good value to their communities. Through joint planning and co-ordination, agencies achieve more effective use of limited resources.

They are able to:

- focus their services in areas of excellence, without feeling they have to cover all the ground
- ensure that a full range of services is provided, but avoid unnecessary duplication
- use strong links with other agencies in the community (for example those helping minority groups or the disadvantaged) to extend access to consumer advice
- enjoy more cost-effective approaches to training and information sharing
- use CSN badging and joint promotional activities to achieve a higher local and national profile.

CSNs also help build stronger relationships between Trading Standards teams and CABx or independent agencies. This will encourage the two-way flow of information about local consumer concerns.

Finally, local campaigns aimed at educating traders and consumers are better co-ordinated and more effective, supporting the aim to create a fairer trading environment for all.

Within our North Ayrshire CSN we have:

- completed a very successful an adult literacy course linked into consumer life skills
- trained community based mentors to SVQ level to inform and direct at local level
- introduced a partnership agreement between advisory agencies
- set up information points at local libraries
- produced CSN information leaflets
- on-line information on CSN via www.north-ayrshire.gov.uk
- set up in house training on consumer matters to agencies and organisations.

Our Consumer Support Network is in place and moving forwards creating a single point of contact ensuring that whatever the enquiry or help that is required access is quick and seamless. In the community, links are being forged to reach out and ensure consumers have easy access to our services.

Let's hope consumers do their part and continue to raise their concerns and voice their complaints about faulty goods or services and seek prompt help with financial problems and take positive action.

All our services are free and confidential and further consumer information is available on-line.

For further information on the Consumer Support Network, please contact Andrew Dunn (see below for contact details).

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