



REGENERATION AND ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 18TH SEPTEMBER 2012

**SUBJECT: ANNUAL REPORT ON THE CONSUMER ADVICE SERVICE PROVIDED
BY TRADING STANDARDS**

REPORT BY: CHIEF EXECUTIVE

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To provide information to Members on the number and nature of complaints dealt with by the Consumer Advice function of the Trading Standards Service for the financial year 2011/2012.
- 1.2 To inform Members of changes in the way consumer advice calls are being handled on a national basis due to the recent closure of Consumer Direct, the Government funded advice service, the replacement service being run by Agilysis on behalf of Citizens Advice.

2. SUMMARY

- 2.1 The Consumer Advice function within the Trading Standards Service, dealt with 1602 requests for in-depth consumer advice during the year. Second-hand cars and home improvements continue to be the main source of complaints.
- 2.2 First line basic consumer advice was dealt with by Consumer Direct Wales on behalf of the authority until 31 March 2012. Calls that require in-depth intervention due to their technical or legally complex nature are referred through to Consumer Advice officers within the Trading Standards service. Most calls are automatically referred at first contact if they are made by vulnerable consumers, or if they relate to a criminal offence. During the last financial year Consumer Direct dealt with 4871 telephone calls, either from Caerphilly residents, or about businesses based within Caerphilly county borough.

3. LINKS TO STRATEGY

- 3.1 The assistance provided to Caerphilly residents with consumer problems contributes to the following Corporate Improvement Plan themes:
 - Building Better Lifestyles – by protecting the public from criminal activities and empowering consumers;
 - Building a Vibrant Economy – supporting local small and medium sized businesses.

The Consumer Advice function contributes to the following Community Strategy Themes:

- Education for Life – improving knowledge and empowering consumers to take action;
- Living Environment – making the borough a place where people are happy to live.

The Consumer Advice function also contributes to the outcomes of other strategies including:

- Strategic Equality Plan - Objective 1: Individuals, families and groups in the communities of Caerphilly county borough feel safe living their own lives at home, at work and in the community at large;
- Protection of Vulnerable Adults;
- Safeguarding Children.

4. THE REPORT

4.1 Consumer complaints are categorised on the authority's database by trade sector and by product or service. Categorisation of complaints follows the current national scheme and allows the data gathered to be used in planning services and, in particular, intervention against particular problem trade sectors.

4.2 The table below gives the top 10 products/services and the monetary value involved that were complained about during 2011/2012:

	Product/Service	Number	% of Total	Value £
1.	Second-hand cars	192	12%	499,025
2.	Home maintenance and Improvements	120	7%	238,493
3.	Personal computers	79	5%	7,507
4.	Telecommunications (including mobiles)	67	4%	11,012
5.	Vehicle Repairs and Servicing	63	4%	38,902
6.	Furniture	52	3%	66,935
7.	Clothing	48	3%	1,651
8.	Competitions, Prize Draws	44	3%	N/A
8.	Radio, TV and AV Equipment	44	3%	14,577
10.	Credit businesses	41	3%	64,356
11.	Non-Life insurance	39	2%	7,461

NB* figures above discount 135 complaints about food and drink, the majority of which related to under-age sales of alcohol.

The analysis is comparable with national data, with second-hand cars and home maintenance being the highest sources of complaints.

4.3 Referrals to Caerphilly Trading Standards have remained constant over the past two years, however the number of complaints received from Caerphilly residents by the National helpline continue to increase. Complaint resolution is however now more difficult to achieve with many national companies less willing to offer consumers redress where it is due to them. As such the complexity of cases and the time taken to bring them to resolution has increased.

4.4 The total value of all goods and services complained about for the financial year was £1,374.320. This figure excludes high value complaints regarding financial advice and prize draws.

4.5 Levels of criminal complaints requiring formal criminal investigation continue to rise.

5. NATIONAL CONSUMER ADVICE HELPLINE

5.1 Until 31st March 2012 Consumer Direct Wales dealt with all initial calls for advice with the exception of personal callers to Ty Pontllanfraith, and written referrals to the service (e-mail, fax and letter). On 2nd April 2012 this function was transferred to Citizens Advice who have engaged Agilysis, an IT and business service provider, to run the Citizens Advice Consumer

Helpline (CACS) on their behalf. Government funding for the service has been reduced and there are concerns over future capacity and public awareness of who to contact for advice on consumer problems. There is a dedicated contact centre for Wales based in Cwmbran and we are liaising with Citizens Advice during the early stages of transition.

- 5.2 As yet it is not known how the changes will impact upon local authority resources or whether the service currently provided to Caerphilly county borough residents will be affected. A clearer picture will emerge as the year progresses.

6. CUSTOMER SATISFACTION LEVELS

- 6.1 A monthly customer satisfaction survey is sent to all users of the service. This year's results show that 98% of users are fairly or very satisfied with the service. Response time indicators show that 96% of users had an initial response within one working day.

7. EXAMPLES OF COMPLAINTS

- 7.1 Detailed below are examples of assistance given to Caerphilly residents by the Trading Standards Consumer Advice service during the year:

- Mr and Mrs A, an elderly couple had just returned from living abroad for 25 years were experiencing difficulties with a National company in relation to the provision of a land line telephone and a internet facility. The landline was essential due to medical difficulties. The couple had been attempting to resolve issues themselves with no effect. Age Cymru who were assisting them with another issue suggested that the telephone issue be referred to us. A home visit was made and full details obtained which enabled officers to contact the company and full service was resumed within two days. The couple were happy with the outcome and stated they had wished they had come to us much earlier.
- The service was contacted by the family of a lady, Mrs J., who had contracted with a large retail DIY Company for the complete renovation of her bathroom at cost of £5500. Following completion of the work Mrs J. was unhappy with the installation, especially the standard tiling and decoration together with the way in which the bathroom suite and shower had been fitted. Mrs J. had attempted to resolve the matter with the local installation manager but a breakdown in relations had led to a stalemate being reached. A joint site visit was arranged with a representative from the company's head office, a trading standards representative and Mrs J's daughter. It was agreed that the job was totally unsatisfactory and the company representative authorised the complete refitting of the bathroom to be carried out at Mrs J's convenience and at no extra cost. Mrs J. was extremely happy with the final result.
- A warden at a Caerphilly CBC OAP complex contacted the service about an elderly resident that had a large problem with a large lottery company. The elderly resident had thought she had agreed to pay £8 per month for two entries in the weekly lottery draw. This had gone on for almost a year. The lady was contacted by her bank who were concerned that her bank balance was unusually low. The bank then discovered that £80 per month was being taken from her account in lottery payments not the £8 she had agreed to. Officers obtained full details of payments made from the bank and contacted the lottery company. They accepted that there had been an error in the payments made and a refund of over £900 was obtained, much to the relief of the lady concerned.

- 7.2 Further examples of the redress obtained on behalf of Caerphilly County Borough residents are given below:

- £6,300 refund on vehicle obtained from credit card company during a criminal investigation.

- £900 cancelled GAP insurance on behalf of a terminally ill man.
- £1,600 following mediated court settlement in relation to a fitted kitchen dispute.
- £1,595 refund on unsatisfactory motorcar.

8. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 Consumer advice is provided to members of the community in the language and format of their choice in line with the Council's Strategic Equality Objective 4: Communications Access.
- 8.2 This report is for information purposes only, so the Council's Equalities Impact Assessment process does not need to be applied.

9. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 None.

10. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 None.

11. CONSULTATIONS

- 11.1 The report has been sent to the Consultees listed below and there are no responses, which have not been reflected in the recommendations.

12. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 12.1 That Members consider and note the content of this report.

13. STATUTORY POWER

- 13.1 Trading Standards staff enforce a wide range of legislation relating to consumer complaints that require mediation and intervention.

Author: Timothy Keohane, Senior Trading Standards Officer – Ext 5064
 Consultees: Cllr. Dave Poole, Cabinet Member for Community and Leisure Services
 Cllr. D.T. Davies, Chair Regeneration and Environment Scrutiny
 Cllr. E.M. Aldworth, Vice-Chair Regeneration and Environment Scrutiny
 Anthony O'Sullivan, Chief Executive
 Robert Hartshorn, Head of Public Protection
 Jacqui Morgan, Trading Standards & Licensing Manager
 Jonathan Jones, Democratic Services Manager
 David A. Thomas, Senior Policy Officer (Equalities and Welsh Language)