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26 February 2013

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Consultation: Reviewing Our Consultation Guidance

The Consumer Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to this discussion paper.

The Consumer Council is an independent consumer organisation, working to bring about change to benefit Northern Ireland (NI) consumers. Our aim is to make the consumer voice heard and make it count. We have a statutory remit to *promote and safeguard the interests* of consumers in NI and we have specific functions in relation to energy, water, transport and food (the Consumer Council and the Food Standards Agency (FSA) have a memorandum of understanding and the Council's strategic focus on food is primarily in relation to food prices and customer experience). These include considering consumer complaints and enquiries, carrying out research and educating and informing consumers.

The Consumer Council is also a designated body for the purposes of supercomplaints, which means that we can refer any consumer affairs goods and services issue to the Office of Fair Trading, where we feel that the market may be harming consumers' best interests. In taking forward our broad statutory remit we are informed by and representative of consumers in NI. We work to bring about change to benefit consumers by making their voice heard and making it count. To represent consumers in the best way we can, we listen to them and produce robust evidence to put their priorities at the heart of all we do.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Comments

With regard to this discussion paper, we note the 4 key areas identified in the document and the associated proposals on the way forward.

1. General Format

It is important that guidance should be easy to read and interpret. Therefore acronyms and jargon should be avoided where possible. If this is unavoidable, then appropriate definitions should be provided to ensure clarity. The level of understanding by stakeholder groups of the subject that are being consulted on should also be taken into consideration in preparing the consultation document.

2. Process

Stakeholder workshops facilitated by the Regulator have proved to be very useful and informative. The Consumer Council would be keen to see such workshops becoming an integral part of the consultation process particularly on issues that are technical in nature and therefore may warrant further explanation.

Pre-consultation notification, discussions and workshops can inform, shape and create a more meaningful formal consultation process.

3. Engagement

The Consumer Council believes that for the Regulator to achieve its stated objectives in carrying out consultations it must inform and be informed by its stakeholders. The Regulator must consult with consumers, energy companies, other industry parties and provide transparency on its decision making process.

The majority of consumers are not familiar with the financial and technical detail that is a necessary part of the Regulator's work, but they do know what they want from their energy and water supplier. To enable consumers to understand and influence consultations the Regulator should:

- Work with the Consumer Council to engage with consumers, undertake consumer research and seek views and opinions from consumers on the options under consideration; and
- Include a concise, 'Consumer Impact Assessment', highlighting the main costs and benefits to consumers in all consultation documents.

This point is clearly linked to the 'process' point above. Up front face to face engagement with stakeholders allows open dialogue to take place. It also facilitates discussion that assists stakeholders to clarify their understanding of issues. The Consumer Council has benefitted from such open engagement and has received positive feedback from other stakeholders.

4. Timing

Stakeholders like the Consumer Council respond to a significant number of the consultations issued by the Regulator. This requires us to plan and allocate resources to respond to each consultation. In that context, we would welcome clarity on the type of issues that would fall into the Long, Medium, and Short categories. The Consumer Council would also suggest that the Regulator considers the inclusion of a consultation timeline as a section within its FWP. Details on each of the planned consultations associated with the work programme, when each consultation is to be issued and the length of the consultation could be included.

The Regulator will be aware of the Consumer Council's project '*Regulation working better for consumers*' which will incorporate consultation, consumer engagement, and consumer influence. We look forward to working with the Regulator on this project and continuing to improve how we work together to better represent and protect consumers.

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