



Note of a meeting in Brussels, 31 May 2007

Purpose of the meeting: the Ofcom Consumer Panel presented its Consumer Interest Toolkit to DG SANCO, at the invitation of Commissioner Meglena Kuneva.

Background

1. Colette Bowe and Graham Mather of the Ofcom Consumer Panel delivered a presentation on its Consumer Interest Toolkit at a workshop attended by forty officials from DG SANCO (the European Commission Directorate General Health and Consumer Protection) on May 31st.
2. The presentation provided the focus for the day's discussion about how the Toolkit, a methodology for taking into account the consumer interest within an organisation's decision and policy making structures and based loosely on an audit process, could be incorporated into the European Commission's (EC) own processes.
3. The Consumer Panel was asked to present at the workshop by Meglena Kuneva, the European Commissioner for Consumer Protection. Kuneva wants the consumer interest to be better understood across the EC. When reviewing what the innovative approaches were for incorporating the consumer interest within policy development across all the Member States, the only example DG SANCO found was the Consumer Panel's Consumer Interest Toolkit.

Outcome

4. DG SANCO would test how best it can be applied to its policy and decision making processes. DG SANCO felt applying the toolkit to the EC legislative and policy development process could have a healthy disciplinary impact, provide legitimacy and political credibility, and be used to assess whether policies have delivered results.

Participants

5. Those who attended the workshop were: European Commissioner Meglena Kuneva, members of her cabinet; officials from DG SANCO, from Director General downwards; a senior official from the EC's Secretariat General; Jim Murray, Director of BEUC; Colette Bowe, Graham Mather and Ben Wallis from the Ofcom Consumer Panel.

Ofcom Consumer Panel presentation

6. Colette Bowe explained that the toolkit helps organisations to explicitly think about the consumer interest in its decision and policy development process. The reasons why the Consumer Panel decided to develop the toolkit were to help Ofcom:
 - Accept that there's no such thing as an average consumer
 - Build a research-driven evidence base
 - Identify the consumer detriment
6. The success of the toolkit has been due to the full support of the Ofcom Board for, and its commitment to, the toolkit.
7. Graham Mather suggested that the toolkit approach could assist:
 - the EC in preparing the consumer impact indicators within its emerging Impact Assessments
 - the Group of Commissioners in charge of Competitiveness in their monitoring of the quality of the assessment of consumers' interests
 - the EC in thinking about the consumer early in policy development at a time when President Barroso is urging the EU institutions to reconnect with citizens.
8. The Consumer Panel outlined three aspects crucial to its own success:
 - The Panel influences Ofcom at the *pre*-legislative stage
 - Strong research provides a solid evidence base and the research findings can challenge policy pre-conceptions
 - The diverse backgrounds and experiences of the Consumer Panel's members are important

Discussion of the Toolkit approach

9. After the presentation, there followed three hours of an intense, lively and at times contentious discussion about how to capture the consumer interest within the process of policy making. Some of the questions the Consumer Panel responded to were: how the consumer interest can be quantified; how best the Consumer Panel's toolkit can be incorporated into the EC decision and policy-making process; and how these processes can be embedded across an organisation in a uniform manner.

For further information

- the full February 2006 Ofcom Consumer Panel publication *Capturing the consumer interest: A toolkit for regulators and government* can be found at: www.ofcomconsumerpanel.org.uk/publications/capturing_the_consumer_interest.pdf
- the February 2007 Ofcom statement *Taking account of consumer and citizen interests: Progress and evaluation – 12 months on* can be found at: www.ofcomconsumerpanel.org.uk/advice/consumer_interest_toolkit/C4.pdf
- Bullet points of the Ofcom Consumer Panel presentation at the May 31st meeting are available from Ben Wallis, Policy Executive to the Consumer Panel (benjamin.wallis@ofcomconsumerpanel.org.uk, tel: 020 7981 3833)