

**Report to: ENVIRONMENTAL & CONSUMER PROTECTION COMMITTEE
19th MARCH 2001**

Report on: CONSUMER SUPPORT NETWORKS

Report by: PRINCIPAL TRADING STANDARDS OFFICER

Report No: 165-2001

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To make the Committee aware of the launch of the Consumer Support Networks (CSN) initiative, by the Department of Trade and Industry.
- 1.2 To seek the Committee's agreement to register a notice of intention to form a Consumer Support Network in Dundee, and to make an application for start up support.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That Dundee City Council, as the main local provider of consumer advice, operate and co-ordinate a local Consumer Support Network.
- 2.2 That the Principal Trading Standards Officer returns a notice of intention to register a CSN before the 31st March 2001, and identifies early planning work, the costs of which would be met from the £5000 CSN grant.
- 2.3 That the Principal Trading Standards Officer identifies relevant advice agencies within the city, arranges an audit of existing advice provision, and identifies any further development work, the cost of which would be met from the £10,000 grant.
- 2.4 That the Principal Trading Standards Officer engages with colleagues from neighbouring local authority trading standards services, with a longer term aim of developing and improving links with consumer advice agencies in the larger Tayside and North Fife area.

3.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1 Notification of an intention to set up a CSN will allow access to up to £5000 for initial planning work. Registration has to be made before 31st March 2001. In addition, five days free consultancy will be supplied by a CSN National Support Team operated by LACOTS (Local Authorities Co-ordinating Body on Food & Trading Standards).
- 3.2 Registered CSNs can then apply for development grants of up to £10,000 to take forward actions as part of a Network Development Plan. A £30m 'modernisation fund' has also been set up by the Department of Trade and Industry for trading standards services over the next three years, and it is likely that monies would be available for CSN development from that fund.
- 3.3 There should be no additional financial implications in terms of staffing costs as the CSN will utilise existing advice provision.

4.0 DUNDEE 21 IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 Key Theme 10: Access to the skills, knowledge and information needed to enable everyone to play a full part in society. A local CSN will enable consumers to more

efficiently seek and obtain advice in relation to their rights, and to safeguard those rights where necessary.

5.0 EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IMPLICATIONS

5.1 None

6.0 BACKGROUND

- 6.1 In October 2000, following the White Paper 'modern markets: confident consumers' published in July 1999, the Department of Trade and Industry launched the Consumer Support Network initiative, to encourage existing consumer advice providers to come together and form local networks to improve standards and access for consumers.
- 6.2 In some ways the scheme was an alternative to making the provision of consumer advice by local authorities a statutory requirement. It was borne out of the wide variations in levels of consumer advice provision throughout the UK, identified in the 1999 Audit Commission 'Measure for Measure' report on trading standards services in England & Wales. It is likely that participation in a CSN will be linked to Best Value indicators in England and Wales.
- 6.3 Consumer advice agencies within a Network will have to show their competence by way of accreditation to a recognised quality scheme.
- 6.4 The aims of CSNs are to:
- Give consumers improved access to accurate and timely advice
 - Encourage a customer focussed approach
 - Encourage advice agencies to measure their performance
 - Create a trading environment with confident and knowledgeable consumers
 - Facilitate the sharing of experience and best practice
- 6.5 Dundee City Council Trading Standards section is the main provider of consumer advice within the city, and has 3.5 (FTE) advisers. This figure of 2.4 advisers per 100,000 population compares well with Audit Commission published figures for England and Wales, and with levels in Fife, Angus and Perth Councils.
- 6.6 In the year to 31 March 2000, 3447 consumer complaints and enquiries were received by Dundee Trading Standards, an increase of 20% over the previous year. Over 20% of these contacts were from consumers resident outside Dundee, who had obtained goods or services within the city.
- 6.7 Examples of other advice providers within the city, which might be included in the CSN would be the Citizen's Advice Bureau, Dundee North Law Centre, local solicitors, NRDD neighbourhood centres and information points, student unions etc.
- 6.8 A wider CSN to cover the Tayside and North Fife area would include consumer advice providers in Fife, Angus and Perth, as well as their respective trading standards services. A preliminary discussion between these authorities has indicated that a wider CSN would be an achievable longer term objective, with Dundee being a focal shopping and business centre.
- 6.9 The start up and development planning stages of setting up the Consumer Support Network should be achieved within six months of registration.

7.0 CONSULTATIONS

- 7.1 The Chief Executive
Director of Environmental & Consumer Protection
Director of Support Services
Director of Finance

8.0 BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 8.1 No background papers were relied on to a material extent in preparing the above report.

9.0 SIGNATURE

Principal Trading Standards Officer

Date: 1st March 2001