

Meeting of the SLCC Consumer Panel

Tuesday 12 February 2019

Venue: The Stamp Office, 10 – 14 Waterloo Place, Edinburgh, EH1 3EG

Present: Shaben Begum (SB), Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance
Miriam Simpson (MS), Competition & Markets Authority
Hilary Kidd (HK), YoungScot

David Buchanan-Cook, SLCC Head of Strategic Insight (HoSI)

Apologies: Carol Brennan (CB) [Chair], QMU Consumer Dispute Resolution Centre
Louise Johnson (LJ), Scottish Women's Aid
Paul Bradley (PB), Scottish Council of Voluntary Organisations
Susan McPhee (SM), Citizens Advice Scotland

In attendance: Sophie Flemig, SLCC Director of Public Policy (DoPP)

1. Welcome

SB, deputising for the Chair, welcomed all present to the meeting of the Panel, particularly welcoming HK who was attending as a guest on behalf of YoungScot, and the SLCC Director of Public Policy.

2. Apologies

Apologies were received from CH, LJ, SM and PB.

3. Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

4. Approval of previous Minute

The Minute of the previous Panel meeting was approved.

5. Actions

The HoSI confirmed that the majority of actions on the register had now been cleared. In relation to action No. 83, he noted that despite making contact with the complainer concerned, she had failed to provide the promised comments.

6. Regulatory change

The DoPP provided a brief update on regulatory change. She advised that the SLCC Board was still considering what position to take in relation to the Robertson proposals, and that the SLCC's strategy would depend on that. However, she reminded the Panel that this was key opportunity for the Panel to make a real contribution to the debate and ensure that the consumer voice was heard, particularly in light of the stance taken by the LSS that the proposals in the report would jeopardise consumer rights.

The DoPP further advised that she understood that there would be a public consultation later in the year, after the Legal Aid consultation had concluded. However, as the emphasis was on taking this opportunity to get things right, it would be a lengthy process. There was a need to keep the debate alive through engaging with a wide range of stakeholders. She confirmed that she would keep the Panel updated on progress, including SLCC thinking.

The Panel expressed some surprise that various consumer groups had not been as engaged as they would have expected and wondered how best to get them involved. It was suggested that a roundtable event, perhaps literally on “where is the consumer voice”, would be a good way of encouraging engagement and that this would be a good fit with the Panel’s previous work. The Panel also considered that it would be useful to include younger people in the group. The DoPP said that she would be happy to support this with resource and also offered to share with the Panel a wider stakeholder list which she was creating which might suggest further useful potential attendees for a roundtable.

7. SLCC quarterly statistics and long-term trends

The HoSI gave a short introduction to these papers (agenda items 7 & 8) which were taken together. He drew the Panel’s attention to the fact that, although complaint numbers were continuing to be high, the quarterly figures showed that work in hand (WIP) had again slightly decreased. It was again considered that this may be due to the new process improvements which had been implemented, and also indicative of the fact that newer staff were getting more up to speed.

The DoPP advised that it was intended to identify academic interest in researching the reasons behind the overall increase in complaint numbers.

8. SLCC feedback

The HoSI introduced these papers, in particular drawing the Panel’s attention to the individual comments which carried the same concerns relating to perceived bias, and time delays, as in previous quarters.

The Panel focussed on a comment which referred to a failure to have a face to face meeting with an Investigator which one complainer had considered would have been more effective. This led to a wider discussion around accessibility to the SLCC process and questions around whether recent “sprints”, focussing on the consumer journey time, were detrimental to complainer access. It was noted, for example, that the GMC was pushing for the opportunity to allow face to face meetings. It was agreed that this would be raised for comment to the SLCC Board.

9. Vulnerable complainers

The HoSI presented the final version of the Panel’s publication arising from the roundtable discussion on vulnerable consumers/complainers. The Panel agreed that this was a good document and had no further comments to make in relation to the content. The HoSI confirmed that the document would now be passed to an external designer.

The DoPP asked what further support might be provided by Oversight to assist launching the guidance. It was agreed that a one-page graphic would be created, as well as a short introductory “talking head” video for the website.

10. Demographics tracker

The HoSI advised that access to the demographics data had only recently been made available and he proposed to circulate that separately for comment prior to publishing the information as a tracker. The Panel agreed this approach.

11. SLCC Operating Plan and Strategy

The HoSI referred to an extract from the SLCC Operating Plan which, together with the proposed budget, was currently out for public consultation – the extract outlined proposed activities for the Panel which the HoSI confirmed had been drafted in consultation with the Panel Chair. The Panel was content with its proposed activities for the 2019-20 operating year. It was agreed that the HoSI would draft a response to the Budget Consultation on behalf of the Panel which would be circulated to members for comment prior to submission.

The Panel then went on to discuss the Panel's strategic direction. The HoSI proposed that it would be beneficial for time to be set aside specifically to draft the Panel's strategy, especially in light of the regulatory changes which were in prospect. He advised that, following discussions with the Chair, it had been agreed that a facilitator from the Carnegie Foundation would attend an additional meeting of the Panel. After discussion it was agreed that this should take place on the morning of the next scheduled meeting – 7 May. It was noted that the facilitator may be in contact with the panel members in advance of the session and that some prior "homework" might be entailed.

12. Messages for the SLCC Board

The Panel asked that the HoSI relay to the Board the following:

- The Panel is pleased to note that a number of initiatives in Operations are underway to improve consumer journey time and reduce delays. Whilst appreciating that these are areas of concern for consumers, as noted in customer feedback responses, the Panel considers that accessibility is of equal importance. There is a risk that concentration on speed may unintentionally penalise some complainers who are at risk of vulnerability. The Panel suggests that it would be beneficial to hold a joint session with Board members to discuss how best to achieve a balance between reducing journey time whilst maintaining consumer accessibility.

13. Date of next meeting

It was noted that the next meeting would take place on the afternoon of 7 May. As discussed above, a strategy session would be held on the morning of the same date.

14. AOB

The Panel discussed whether it might be beneficial to formalise the role of Deputy Chair to deputise when the Chair was unavailable. It was agreed that the HoSI would review the Panel's Terms of Reference and, if necessary, request approval of the SLCC Board. It was also agreed that the Board's approval would be requested to admit YoungScot as a membership organisation of the Panel.

There being no further business, SB drew the meeting to a close.