

# putting up with second best

summary of research into consumer attitudes towards  
involvement and representation

### About the National Consumer Council

The purpose of the National Consumer Council is to make all consumers matter. We do this by putting forward the consumer interest, particularly that of disadvantaged groups in society, by researching, campaigning and working with those who can make a difference to achieve beneficial change. We are a non-profit-making company limited by guarantee and funded partly by the Department of Trade and Industry.

Our objectives are to work to:

- Develop markets and public services that work for everyone by finding the right balance between free markets, regulation and self-regulation;
- Create smart, streetwise, skilled consumers by promoting access to high quality education, information and advice;
- Provide solutions to the problems of exclusion by tackling the barriers that put goods and services out of reach;
- Ensure decision-makers everywhere are consumer aware by strengthening consumer representation;
- Achieve the right balance between innovation and consumer protection by improving the understanding, communication and management of risk and uncertainty.

Please check our web site at [www.ncc.org.uk](http://www.ncc.org.uk) for up-to-date news about our publications, policies and campaigns. We can often make our publications available in braille or large print, on audio tape or computer disk. Please contact us for details.

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### About the research

The National Consumer Council commissioned MORI to conduct focus group research with consumers to explore attitudes towards, and understanding of, involvement and representation.

MORI carried out eight focus groups across England in August 2001. Each group was made up of eight to ten consumers. The eight groups covered a broad range of locations, ages, social classes, ethnicities and genders (although within any given group, the participants were all from a similar demographic background).

The discussion topics included:

- whether consumers feel their views are taken into account
- whether consumers want their views to be taken into account
- what consumers know about representative bodies
- the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches.

The focus groups discussed those issues that concerned them, and those in which they would be most likely to get involved.

It needs to be noted that qualitative research such as that used in this study is designed to be illustrative of people's views, rather than to provide statistically representative data. In addition, the findings reflect people's perceptions, which may not always be accurate.

### Our representation remit

The National Consumer Council has recently been given a government remit to embark on a major project to improve the ways in which consumers' interests are represented to, and taken account of by, decision-makers. The project aims to explore how representation arrangements can be better connected to consumers' views and experiences.

The project will do this by focusing on:

- domestic consumers of both public and private goods and services
- groups of consumers who may find it difficult to ensure that their interests are identified and taken account of by decision-makers.

Consumers include people who are currently consuming or using products and services, and those people who are not, or cannot, despite a need.

Effective consumer representation and involvement processes are vital to ensure that the common interests of consumers - as purchasers and users of goods and services - are identified, articulated, and taken fully on board when decisions are made that affect them.

The purpose of this NCC research is to support and inform the development of an effective framework for consumer involvement and representation.

### NCC findings

To help us uncover the consumer issues of the future and focus our current policies on real consumer issues, the National Consumer Council commissions market research that explores consumer concerns.

NCC findings are summaries of the key findings of our consumer research. They are used to inform our discussions, and are shared with relevant bodies through our publications, web site, seminars, consumer forums, and special briefing sessions.

# Putting up with second best - summary

There is huge interest in encouraging consumers to become involved in local communities, tenants groups, parent governor bodies and as consumer representatives on national panels or committees. But without the right mechanisms for involvement and representation, and proper information or feedback, people are unlikely to get involved. The clear message from our research is that public awareness of and engagement with involvement and representation are severely limited.

## The research

Our research explored consumers' attitudes towards, and understanding of, involvement and representation. We asked people about the issues that concern them as consumers, and about their views on getting involved in these issues.

The research looked at expectations and perceptions of how consumers' interests are taken into account by decision-makers. It looked at whether or not consumers wish to be involved themselves in decision-making, and if they are happy for representatives to present views on their behalf.

## What concerns consumers?

When consumers do show concern about a particular issue, they are fairly ambivalent about whether they would actually get involved. It seems that they are more likely to get involved if the issue has a direct personal impact. They tend to see getting involved in terms of making an individual complaint. They appear to be most concerned about issues that have a relatively direct, localised and immediate impact on their lives.

People find it hard to see how they can get involved in or influence large-scale issues with a longer-term impact - such as genetically modified foods or environmental issues.

## Ways of getting involved

Participants were aware of three ways of getting involved:

- individual action, such as letters, phone calls, e-mails, or filling in questionnaires
- non-direct group action such as petitions and public meetings

- direct group action such as boycotts and demonstrations.

## What are the obstacles?

Consumers often feel that getting involved 'won't make any difference' - particularly when it involves expressing minority views. They feel that companies and public sector organisations make decisions behind closed doors.

Consumers are often fatalistic - there is a belief that individuals can't make much difference and that they often have to just put up with difficult situations.

Some said they were made to feel small or stupid when they tried to get involved.

Others express a view that public sector organisations consult consumers because they *have* to rather than because they want to.

Consumers appear to have a very limited perception of representation or how they could have a voice in decisions.

Consumers appear to have a relatively low awareness of regulatory bodies - they are seen mainly as the last line of complaint rather than as decision-makers for their sector.

## More effective involvement

The message from the participants was that involvement needs to be a continual process, not a one-off event. And it has to be backed up with objective information to help consumers contribute. There should also be clear feedback on the outcome of their input and any impact it has had on decision-making.

## NCC findings

- Consumers are concerned about large-scale issues, such as the environment, but are more likely to show concern for local community issues where they feel it is easier to get involved and they can see a direct, personal impact. They know of ways of getting involved - individual and group action - but seem to know little about consumer representation and how that can help them to influence decisions.
- People feel there is no point getting involved in consumer issues, as they believe it will make no difference. Consumer mistrust is a major barrier to involvement. They have perceptions that public consultation is just an exercise and that their views are not taken seriously. Consumers seem to be poorly informed about the role of regulators. This, combined with a lack of understanding of how they can become personally involved, means that consumers are unsure of how they can have a meaningful voice in decision-making.
- For consumer involvement and representation to become more effective, consumers must feel that organisations and companies are taking their views seriously. They want involvement to be a meaningful process, not just a one-off event. Comprehensive information needs to be provided to consumers, including feedback on how their involvement has affected the decision-making process.

# What concerns consumers, and what do they know about involvement?

Consumers are mainly concerned about issues that have a relatively direct, localised and immediate impact on their lives. Larger-scale issues, global and longer-term impact questions, such as genetically modified foods and the environment, do concern them, but they tend not to get involved because they cannot see how they can make an impact in these areas. And if the public feels less able to be engaged in these larger issues, how much will people want to be involved or represented in relation to these issues?

## Consumer concerns

Participants discussed issues that concern them and in which they would most likely get involved. Issues raised included: local council services; housing; transport; the impact of supermarkets on the local economy; and closures of bank branches or hospitals.

However, even for the issues that concern people most there is a fair degree of ambivalence about how much they would actually get involved. People were often fairly warm to the idea of letter writing, attending meetings or talking to a community representative. But when asked about how much they would actually use those methods of involvement, many people acknowledged that, in practice, they would be relatively unlikely to get involved - unless it was over an issue which had direct personal impact.

## Involvement and representation

People are more aware of methods of involvement than representation but they are able to distinguish between when they think involvement or representation would be more effective. For example, involvement was felt to be better for issues that have a direct personal impact - such as complaints about service and consultation about the local area - and representation was preferred for issues where the direct personal impact is less

clear or where people feel a representative will be taken more seriously than individual consumers.

Representation and group involvement are seen as advantageous, especially by younger people who feel they would not have much impact alone.

When outlining ways in which they would like to be involved or represented, participants demonstrated a knowledge of a wide range of mechanisms for involvement, but they were less sure about methods for consumer representation.

**'Unless it affects me personally, me and my children... me and my family... ain't going to do it.'**

Female, aged 25-45, London

**'It depends how much it's going to affect you and what you're interested in and everything.'**

Male, aged 35-55, Huddersfield

**'I wouldn't instigate anything but would sign a petition or, you know, go ahead with a poll, things like that, and support what someone else is doing.'**

Male, aged 35-55, Huddersfield

**'I reckon that you would need an older person to help get your views across. The chances of an 18-year-old compared to a 36-year-old is smaller. Because they look down at you because you're young, they think you don't know anything, but with a 36-year-old they would think they had better listen to what they had to say.'**

Male, aged 15-19, Colchester

**'Maybe a level-headed person that everyone knows, elected from the village to put across our views... Just an ordinary person.'**

Female, aged 55-70, Staffordshire

# Obstacles to effective consumer involvement and representation

**Our research has shed some light on why people feel there is no point in getting involved in consumer issues - particularly larger scale issues. Many people view consumer involvement as 'window dressing', and believe that it will not make any difference to decision-making.**

Consumers' sceptical views are fuelled by a belief that organisations take decisions behind closed doors, and that decisions are financially driven. There appears to be a sense of resignation. Even when people feel they should be listened to, they often stay silent, convinced they can never influence decisions.

An important barrier to consumer involvement is consumers' perception and understanding of the organisations with which they might get involved.

Many people think that public sector organisations only consult the public because they are obliged to, rather than because they want to. Consumers refer to involvement being 'window dressing' and complain of not being taken seriously at meetings.

Some people give examples of having tried to get involved in consumer issues and having been made to feel small or stupid. If this is a common experience, it will clearly be a disincentive to people trying to get involved.

Overall, consumers are poorly informed about how they could have a 'voice' in decisions.

Consumers also appear to have a relatively superficial understanding of the regulatory bodies that oversee the business sectors. If they are mentioned, it is in the context of the bodies being

the last port of call for customers with a complaint. Consumers don't understand the role that the regulatory bodies play in decision-making and setting policies. Without this knowledge, consumers will not realise that there are processes in which they can play an integral part.

**'People do write to companies and complain all the time, but I don't think anything ever gets done.'**

Female, aged 55-70, Surbiton

**'We are used to putting up with second best, and we tend to laugh and make jokes about it really.'**

Female, aged 55-70, Staffordshire

**'We know we can complain and we should complain, and we complain when we get the opportunity, but ... unless it's something that we think we can make a change to the concept, why bother, cos it's not going to make any difference anyway. There's no point.'**

Female, aged 25-45, London

**'I went to one local meeting in the village ... They treated me like something the cat had just dragged in.'**

Male, aged 55-70, Staffordshire

**'They are just more interested in making money than looking after the customer.'**

Female, aged 25-35, Leicester

**'They [banks] tend to look at you as an item. Are you a profitable person, do we care if you go from here? If you've got a few million they probably do. If you've got a few thousand, well, if you want to move we'll make it difficult for you. And you'll probably give up in the end and won't move.'**

Male, aged 35-55, Manchester

# Towards more effective consumer involvement and representation

To make consumer involvement effective, consumers need to feel confident there is real value in getting involved. Consumers need to feel that their concerns are being addressed, and that there is a meaningful way they can get involved and make a difference.

Participants in the research felt that involvement should be based on a continual process, not simply a one-off exercise. People need objective information to help them make an effective contribution. There should also be proper feedback so consumers can see if their views have made a difference, as well as information on outcomes and any changes to service delivery or decision-making.

Consumers clearly state that involvement will only work if companies and organisations genuinely want to take account of consumer views. They also say that it is important that consumers themselves are allowed to set the agenda for consultations.

To make consultation and involvement effective the following factors are essential:

- Consumers want meaningful involvement.
- Involvement should be a process - not a one-off meeting or event.
- Comprehensive, trustworthy information needs to be provided.
- Consumers need feedback - they want to know what has been decided and why.

The groups did not show a great deal of interest in being involved in issues which affect others. People seem happy to discuss the various ways of getting involved, but it is more likely to be passive than active.

**'Don't talk at us. Talk to us.'**

Female, aged 55-70, Staffordshire

**'I don't think we are informed about things the right way. We usually have to go to newspapers for information which might not be the correct information depending on which newspaper you might read.'**

Female, aged 55-70, Staffordshire

**'Perhaps with questionnaires that are sent out, with the previous questionnaires this is what we've done. Then it would make you more inclined to take part.'**

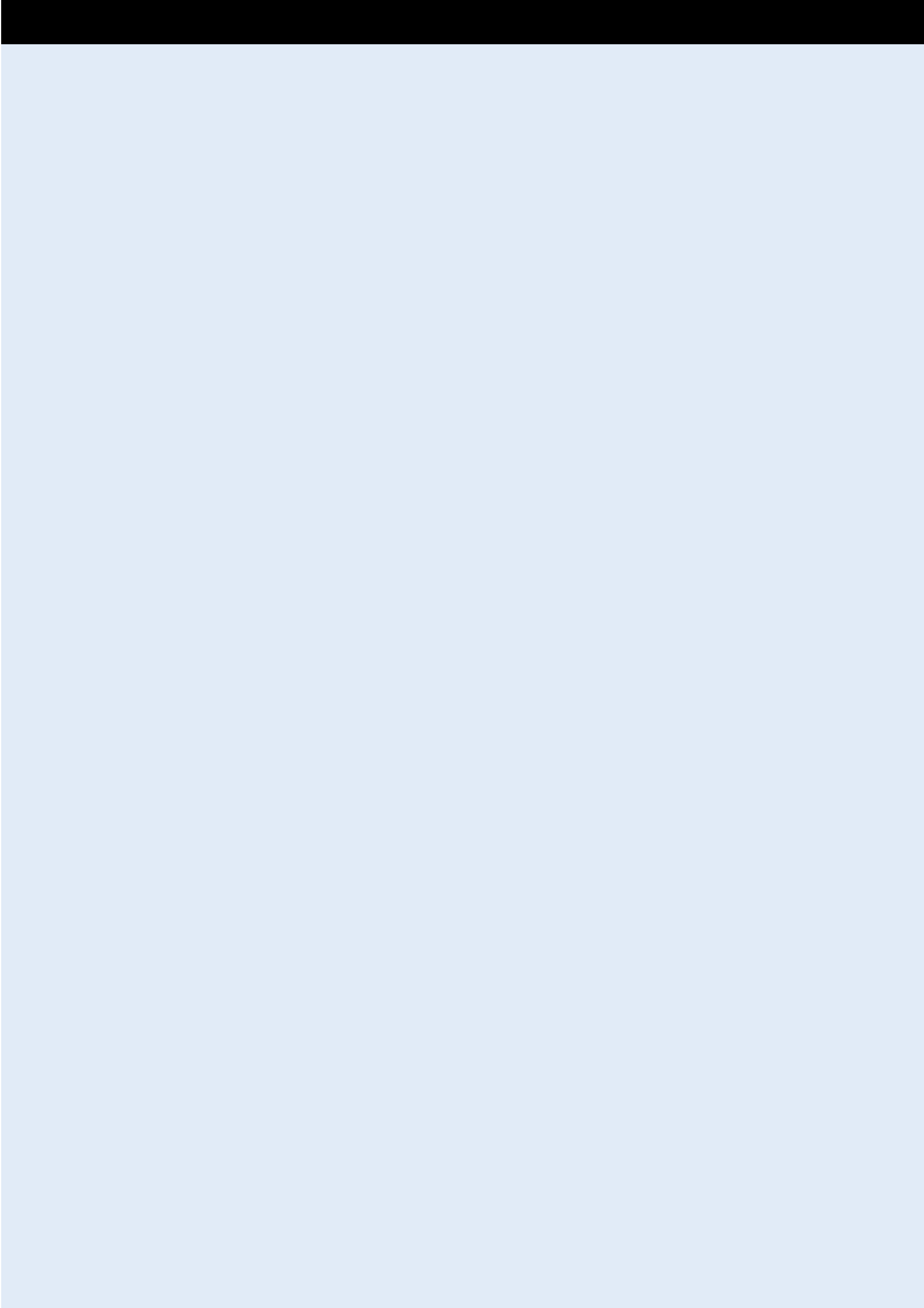
Male, aged 35-55, Huddersfield

**'Feedback is the best thing, and it gives reassurance you are being listened to.'**

Female, aged 15-19, Colchester

**'If you're there to tell them what your views are in that scenario [improving recycling locally], then the minimum you should expect is at some stage for them to tell you what's happening. Either they've considered it and decided to go ahead, or they've considered it and decided not to and why.'**

Male, aged 35-55, Manchester



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