

consumer futures

Ignored, isolated, invisible

The world is changing for consumers.

- We are a more diverse group than ever, with different needs and expectations.
- We are better informed about our rights, and use the media and internet to make our voices heard.
- We expect more for our money and care about how our choices affect other people and the environment.

But while most consumers enjoy greater choice, voice and influence, some are being left behind.

- They have less choice.
- They are seen as less attractive as potential customers and have little consumer power.
- They often pay more and receive less for goods and services.

Last year the National Consumer Council (NCC) launched a new initiative, Consumer Futures, to help us better understand consumers and how we can make a difference to them. It focuses on three key questions:

- What does it mean to be a consumer today?
- What do we mean by 'consumer disadvantage'?
- How can we represent consumers and address consumer disadvantage?

To help us answer these questions, we held a number of deliberative forums with people in areas of high multiple deprivation, to give people living there a voice and help us understand the issues they face.

The deprivation of an area is rated according to income, employment, health and disability, education, skills and training, barriers to housing and services, living environment and crime.

This booklet summarises one of themes that emerged from this research, people's thoughts on being heard and represented.

For more information on our research and overall findings see our booklet, *Understanding disadvantage*.

For more information on another of the key themes from the research, resolving consumer problems, see our booklet *Time-poor, cash-poor*.

The people we refer to in our findings are those who took part in the deliberative forums, living in areas of high deprivation.

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A striking theme throughout our forums was the extent to which people in areas of high deprivation feel that their voices are unheard, their views unrepresented and their needs ignored because of the stigma attached to the areas they live in.

Often the everyday problems that people face can be made worse by these feelings, and a sense of isolation and disconnection from the rest of society.



Ignored

'There have been issues for years and years – why would they change?'

'You have to do it yourself and be self-reliant.'

Many of the people we spoke to felt they got a raw deal from both public and private services. They felt that people who lived in other areas often got a better deal.

For example, one respondent said 'They've just spent £2 million on a leisure centre, haven't they, in [another area]. They already had a leisure centre – we wanted one... we haven't got anything... we could really do with a swimming pool.'

Their experiences as consumers led them to believe that they were not viewed as desirable customers, and that providers were actively distancing themselves from people like them, by shifting their emphasis away from face-to-face contact.

One participant explained the difficulties in trying to resolve her housing issues since the housing office had moved from the estate:

'Any problems you used to just go to the shop, sort it out in there and within two days you'd have somebody there. But now they've moved off the estate it is a matter of paying bus fares, and I'm unemployed myself and I just can't afford it.'

Although some people were angered by their experience and felt a strong sense of injustice, most were resigned to the situation. They felt they had little ability to effect change and so had very low expectations about future improvements. They accept the way things are and don't expect them to change. People's experiences of not being listened to by service providers such as utilities and telecoms companies, local authorities and banks, appear to contribute significantly to their overall low expectations for the future.

Isolated

'Where's the future for them? No one's doing anything about this so these problems are only going to get worse... There's no community spirit. We're not improving ourselves.'

'There was all sorts of debris in the street, settees, three pieces suits, dustbins tipped over and nothing was done about it for days not for weeks or months... I'm ashamed because I live there and I don't invite my friends.'

Feeling ignored made many people feel isolated; this sense of isolation was often compounded by their neighbourhoods. Some people felt their areas had been neglected or forgotten. One Jaywick resident explained, 'This area was just predominantly a holiday place... now it's evolved and younger people are moving in and they've not caught up with any amenities... At the end of day, we're forgotten in Jaywick.'

They also felt there was a stigma attached to their areas by others: 'I hear holidaymakers outside – you hear the comments they're making... well, if they don't like it, what are they doing here?'

Many were experiencing environmental decay such as excessive rubbish, vandalism and 'no go' areas. Many people had strong connections with the areas they lived in, got on well with their neighbours and had good friends and families nearby. However, they felt ashamed of the state of their streets. Local and community buildings were frequently vandalised and there was also fear about letting children play in local areas because of gangs and drug culture. Many women were afraid to go out after dark:

'Sometimes it can be intimidating if it's getting dark and there's a huge gang.'

'They don't care what they do. They're always hanging round destroying things.'

These factors led to a widespread feeling of community apathy and a feeling that their neighbourhoods lacked the community drive and spirit to make a change, despite the fact that people sometimes had a strong sense of community. One resident explains 'People are just fed up. They'd rather move away – or just can't be bothered.' There was little optimism about improvements in the future and people didn't believe they were able to make their voices heard and make a difference.

Invisible

One resident had experienced numerous problems with her local authority housing and neighbours and didn't feel she got any support from the people that should have been able to help her:

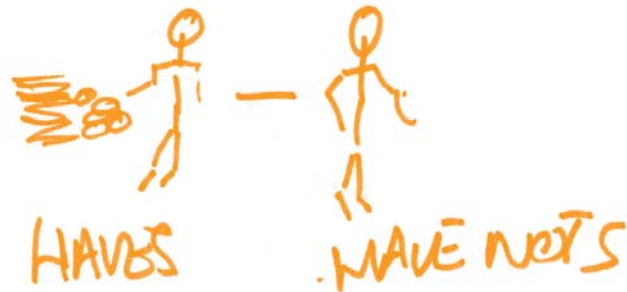
'I wrote to my local councillors and they told me I should move. Why should I move? They're all passing the buck!'

People felt they were invisible – and that their views did not matter and were not taken into account. One of the respondents said, 'It's just lip service and nothing changes.'

They felt left out of civic and political processes and they did not believe that the people that represented them were interested in either their lives or their views. Another respondent said, 'I'd like to think the people in charge were competent, but they aren't. They build your hopes up high and nothing changes.'

A few people knew that they could get results by raising matters with local councillors and MPs, and had done so. But most people didn't consider it. If they did, they either didn't know where to start or didn't believe it could make a difference. One respondent said 'Once they are elected, they do what they want. They do things that show them in the papers rather than the little things.'

Their experience led them to believe that policies were not developed to help them or the areas they lived in – they just felt forgotten or ignored. In many cases this added to the stigma already felt about the areas they lived in.



Being heard

How can we make sure that consumers across the board and in a diverse range of situations are heard? The people we spoke to had six simple requests to help make sure their views were heard, valued and represented.

1. Listen to us

'...something like you are doing here [referring to the deliberative forum] and [if] people actually listened and did something, things would be better.'

2. Talk to us face-to-face

'...because if it's not face-to-face people won't believe they'll do anything.'

3. Come and see how we live

'They should send people to live in the community to find out for themselves – it's ok listening to us, someone needs to be there to see what it's really like.'

4. Help us make our voices heard

'It's difficult for us to get anywhere, to say what we want.'

5. Give us feedback – no more 'fake' listening

'They make a big deal about collaborating and listening to everyone, which they do but in the final [council] decision the weighting given to local people is 20 per cent. We're the ones that have to put up with it, why isn't 80 per cent for us and 20 per cent for them? It's an indication of the fundamental problem. They're communicating with us in the sense that they're getting our views, but they're not listening and responding appropriately.'

6. Be honest

'...If you can't do anything for people, tell them you can't.'

What next?

Our forums show that people living in areas of high deprivation are hit harder by a range of everyday consumer problems, and are particularly vulnerable to practices such as doorstep selling and cold calling. They find it harder, and more costly, to pursue consumer complaints, and feel that their voices are unheard.

Consumer Futures will use the evidence collected from the forums to develop a new definition of 'consumer disadvantage' that accurately reflects the people who are likely to be affected and the reality of their lives; encourage policy-makers, private and public sector service providers, and other consumer bodies to recognise this definition and use it to reduce the impact of consumer disadvantage; and make recommendations to the new National Consumer Council, which comes into being on 1 October 2008, on how best to place the needs of disadvantaged consumers at the heart of its work.