

Local Consumer Groups: an overview of the last 50 years

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Introduction

In this report I have sought to make a brief record of the evolution of local consumer groups, the kinds of work they did, the sorts of people who joined them and successful achievements. I have searched the records of various consumer groups and the NfCG (forerunner of the NCF), and interviewed several people who have been involved with consumer groups for many years.

History and development

Based on experience with *Consumer Reports* in the USA and led by a small group of activists such as Michael Young (later Lord Young of Dartington), Consumers' Association began publication of *Which?* in 1957. This was an almost immediate success. They were worried about local problems, but their programme of comparative testing of nationally available goods could not be extended to cover local issues. In October 1961 they ran a conference in Aylesbury for 500 *Which?* subscribers who felt the need for some local action. Within 10 days the first local consumer group was set up in Oxford, followed shortly by others at Tees-side and Tyneside. Concurrently, Alma Williams had written a letter to the *Guardian* which was published on 15 January 1962, in which she listed various consumer problems she had experienced. This provoked a flood of letters and phone calls to her, which inspired her to write to the *Guardian* again (published 15 February 1962) suggesting that local consumer groups would be a good thing. Caspar Brook, then director of the Consumers' Association, visited Alma and suggested that she form a group in Watford. The Watford and District Group was established and carried out its first survey in the summer of 1962, publishing its first issue of its magazine, *Sentinel*, in October of that year.

The National Federation of Consumer Groups (NfCG) was established on the 15th of March 1963, to bring the new groups together and coordinate their work. By 1965 there were 91 independent local consumer groups, though this declined in later years. An Individual Membership scheme was introduced in 1977, and commercial and other organisations could join as Associates.

NfCG was supported financially by Consumers' Association and the Consumer Affairs Division of the Department of Trade and Industry, as well as from subscriptions from local groups, IMs, corporate members and Associates. Funding from CA was scaled down and ceased after 1998, and similarly, funding from the DTI ceased after 2001.

Over the 38 years of its existence, NfCG was able to claim a wide range of successful achievements: campaigns to improve the structure and fabric of consumer protection, often based on evidence supplied by local consumer groups; the establishment of working groups such as the Legislation Committee, which is still in existence today and can rightly claim to have influenced national changes in legislation; the production of three editions of the *Handbook of Consumer Law*, the *Consumer Action Kit* published in collaboration with The Open University; publications for schools such as *Paper Bag*, and consultation with an extremely wide range of government and other organisations.

In 2001 NfCG became part of the National Consumer Federation, as did Consumer Congress, an annual event which provided a forum for the discussion of consumer issues by a wide range of specialist organisations.

Local consumer group activities

Group research projects carried out during the first 25 years of the NfCG were usefully summarised in *Twenty Five Years of the National Federation of Consumer Groups* as follows:

'Groups have adopted a wide definition of consumerism, spreading their net to include council and hospital services and even the accessibility of public footpaths. Their operations have gone well beyond the High Street. Group members have tramped the streets, haunted, bus and railway stations, visited theatres and restaurants, compared the curricula of comprehensive and fee-paying schools, examined the leisure activities available for young people and facilities for the elderly, and turned the eye of consumer research on swimming baths, libraries, garages, football grounds, pubs, boarding kennels, opticians, public lavatories, Chinese restaurants and family planning clinics. Their work has often involved looking at issues important to mothers with young children like the survey which looked at the consequences of 6 weeks' wear and tear on socks and T-shirts worn by a group of children. Often other local organisations are called in to help with local surveys - pre-school playgroup associations to check on pedestrian safety or the nearby Women's Institute members to help monitor postal deliveries. Groups all around the country have brought pressure to bear on pram and pushchair manufacturers to improve safety design'.

Under the heading of Action the same document reported as follows:

'Group action is often original, conducted to high standards and impressive in its thoroughness and extent, and notable for its persistence. Groups have put more than 20 volunteer researchers into a community to scour the streets to see how many shops were open on Sunday or issued 3,000 questionnaires to commuters for a survey aimed at improving railway facilities.Local grocery and other price surveys which feature in the repertoire of many groups ...have lasted virtually as long as the Federation itself and, in some cases, are still continuing'.

'Groups have nagged and publicised, surveyed and commented, and ferreted into the dark corners of commerce and public service. They have taken the cause of the consumer visibly into the local public arena, publicising their activities through inventively designed local consumer weeks and through effective use of local media. Information is often followed by action. Group campaigns have won local victories of a kind that rarely hit the headlines of the nation's newspapers, but which have improved the quality of, and reduced the irritations in, the lives of ordinary people. Campaigns have been fought over the proposed closure of gas showrooms, the poor standards of bus and rail stations and services, the lending schemes of local libraries, the need for detailed medicine bottle labelling by local chemists, ill-thought-out planning proposals for local supermarkets, availability of telephone kiosks, inadequate taxi services and access for the disabled. Prompted by groups, local issues have become matters of national concern and not infrequently have resulted in better consumer protection through new or improved legislation. For instance, the requirement that all opticians should display the price on spectacle frames was a direct result of a national survey triggered by one local group's preliminary work'.

Personalities

What kinds of people joined local consumer groups? What were their motives, and what did they hope to gain?

To get an idea of the sorts of people that started or joined local consumer groups, and to find out what they hoped to get out of the groups, I interviewed a number of people who have been associated with the consumer group movement for a long time. It may well be that the current climate is so different from the early sixties, when the groups were started that their motives and activities are no longer applicable, but I found it very interesting to hear what they had contributed, how they analysed their local consumer groups, what they judged to be successes and failures and what they had got out of their membership.

Sue Payne

Sue's original interest in consumer topics was based on her work in retailing, where she became interested in how retailers used displays to persuade shoppers to buy. She took the OU course, *Consumer Decisions*, which encouraged her to join a local consumer group. Initially she joined the Dartford Consumer Group, which was run at that time by Brigadier Blackman and his wife Betty, an energetic character. She moved to Bromley, where the consumer group was much bigger, having hundreds of members at one time and needing a large hall for the AGM. Sue believes this to be because Bromley people are joiners, that there is a strong tradition of community activity there. They were lucky to have someone with the skills necessary to produce a professional-looking consumer group magazine. The Bromley Group carried out a wide range of projects, some of which would now be done by more specialist organisations. They cleared public footpaths, they worked for improvements to parks, they surveyed homes for the elderly, as well as engaging in regular surveys of grocery price and that old favourite, public lavatories. They worked closely with other local organisations, checking whether small quantities of foods were available on sale for the elderly and surveying pushchairs in conjunction with LACOTS. They also contributed to nationwide surveys organised by NfCG, such as the accessibility of fire exits from stores. Sue and other members of the Bromley Group served as consumer representatives on the Police Consultative Committee, Neighbourhood Watch committees and Trading Standards groupings. Sue served both as Chair of the Bromley Group and Chair of NfCG in the nineties and is currently a Vice President.

Ken Frere

Ken subscribed to *Which?* from the first issue and was a member of the Abingdon branch of Oxford, the first consumer group to be established in 1961. A fighter pilot in WW2, he became a civil servant after the war running careers services for the Ministry of Labour, afterwards working for the CEGB (Central Electricity Generating Board) and the Atomic Energy Authority (Harwell) in charge of recruitment and training. A founder member of the SDP, he served on the Oxfordshire County Council for many years. Ken was Treasurer of NfCG for several years, representing them on several high level committees, notably the S E Electricity Consultative Committee. He believes that he succeeded best in campaigning on behalf of the consumer was as a member of the ad hoc group

which advised on the Retail Price Index (RPI), where he was the chief spokesman for the consumer cause, informally representing both Which? and Citizens' Advice. Ken recalls that NfCG was the first body to attempt a comparison of energy tariffs – a concept now, of course, taken up by Which? and other bodies – but lacking sufficient IT expertise at the time to make the NfCG system interactive and more easily usable.

Peter Lawrence and Kathleen Moody

Peter and Kathleen have been the long-term mainstays of the Central Herts Consumer Group. Kathleen formerly lived in Lewisham, where Jane McKenzie came from *Which?* to organise a group. She then moved to St Albans and helped to set up the group there. Peter was originally contacted via the *Which?* mailings. Kathleen emphasised that the group members didn't think of themselves as campaigners, but as informers, collecting information and making it available. Their main objective when they started work was to establish that the consumer had a view.

In the early days they had to fight opposition from local shops and, in particular, the local press, who represented them as amateurs trying to tell professionals (ie the retailers) what to do. The Central Herts Group devoted a whole issue of their journal *Trident* to a comparison of local butchers, their prices, what they had on offer and whether there was still sawdust on the floor; this raised a tremendous amount of antagonism among the local butchers, of whom, at that time, there were still quite a few. Group members had to be pretty thick-skinned if they wanted to record prices. Located where they were, the Central Herts Group had access to expert opinion and support, which enabled them to improve their operation. They also linked up with other consumer groups nearby, such as the Watford Consumer Group, to co-publish local guides. Peter and Kathleen stressed the importance of the links they set up with other groupings, representing consumers at, for instance, the Community Health Council. Kathleen chaired the local Electricity Consumer Council for many years, and much regrets its demise, as she feels that much good work was done.

Alma Williams

Alma gave up work as a French teacher to have her three children – but felt that she needed some intellectual stimulation. Her letter to the Guardian (details above) which begins with her saying that she was no longer going to be an apathetic, uncomplaining housewife, generated huge numbers of phone calls and letters, and led to the establishment of the Watford Consumer Group. Alma made her appeal initially to women, since she felt that it was very difficult to be a dynamic woman at that time. Men were not, however, excluded, and Alma's husband Michael was Chair of the Group for several years. The local press were favourable, giving her and the Group much good publicity, and Alma was soon being interviewed on TV and radio. Alma claims that the membership of the Group was not confined to the middle class, but included people from different backgrounds.

It is no surprise that many of the subjects researched by the Group in the early days related to children's toys and equipment, but the range of surveys was soon extended. Alma recalls that initially, at any rate, they had to make things simple, since they lacked expertise in planning and analysis, and had a steep learning curve. They also had to understand the roles of the different local organisations such as Trading Standards and the local health groupings so as to be able to advise enquirers as to how they might progress their complaints. The Watford Group campaigned on environmental issues, such as the proposal to build an airport at Wing.

Finances were always a problem, though Alma recalls that jumble sales were a regular event. Very soon there were requests for consumers to serve as school governors and other volunteers and invitations to contribute to bodies such as the Council for Industrial Design; Alma sees this as one of the main successes of the Group, that they were accepted and consulted.

Founding the Watford Consumer Group proved to be the first step in Alma's career as a consumer representative at the highest levels. Supported by NfCG, she was voted onto the Council of Consumers' Association and she was Chair of the International Committee of IOCU (now Consumers International), advising communities all over the world as to how to set up local consumer groups. She chaired NfCG, later becoming President and Vice President. She has long been active in Europe and claims that her two greatest achievements were to establish European Consumer Day as 15 March, the same day as NfCG was established and to have produced the first draft of the European Product Safety Directive.

Although there is no Consumer Group in Ripon, where Alma has lived for some years, she is President of the local WI, and she encourages them to undertake consumer-type projects as part of their regular activities. Their latest success has been to persuade the Harrogate Hospital, the nearest to Ripon, to give Ripon patients appointments after 11am so as to enable those with bus passes to use them on the buses from Ripon, thus saving them a substantial amount of money!

Summary

Based on the research I have done in the group magazines and the Annual Reports of NfCG, and the interviews I carried out, it is possible to identify a number of factors which contributed to the early success of local consumer groups. The financial backing and support from Consumers' Association, and later from the DTI, was obviously essential to the initial impetus and establishment of groups. CA employed Jane McKenzie, who went to those who had expressed an interest in consumer affairs, organising meetings and encouraging them to set up a group. Another important factor was the presence of strong personalities who were willing and able to overcome opposition, to inspire others and maintain momentum after the first enthusiasm had waned. It was also important to have the right sort of community, where community activity was the norm, or at least accepted, and where there was an available range of the skills needed to do consumer research. This was, at that time, particularly necessary for the production of professional-looking magazines. Contact with the local media, initially problematic in some cases, but successful in others, was important and helped to publicise the work of consumer groups. All the people I interviewed stressed the importance of liaison with other local groups, ranging from talks given to cooperative projects and on-going contacts. It goes almost without saying that the work done by the groups was valuable at both local and, via the Nf CG, at national level.

As to why interest in, and commitment to local consumer groups has dwindled away to almost nothing in 2013, there are issues relating to the national picture, and to the groups themselves and the individuals in them. Much has changed since the early days: new legislation has been brought in, Government initiatives have come in (and also gone), the media play a much more pro-active role in

highlighting consumer problems, funding for NfCG and then NCF has been hard to find, and the United Kingdom is a very different place from the post war country struggling to recover from the effects of WW2. Those I interviewed suggested that long working hours and job pressures inhibit people from spending time nowadays on the kinds of projects traditionally carried out by local consumer groups. Also, a number of those involved in the early days were stay-at-home mothers with young children, who were looking for a stimulating local activity; nowadays there are more working mothers, lacking time and energy.

Those who were super-active in the early days saw themselves as pioneers, champions of the consumer under-dog. They had to learn fast to gain the necessary skills: writing questionnaires, carrying out surveys and organising consumer-related events. But in many cases it proved difficult to find successors with the same motivation, and groups gradually faded away. There has also been a trend towards specific interest groups set up to deal with a particular local problem, which normally close down once their objective has been met, or it has been proven that it is not achievable. There are also more groups such as Greenpeace and the Ramblers' Association who look at problems to do with the environment and campaign to improve them – in 1962 such groups, even when they existed, didn't consider that they should engage in 'political' activity.

One particular problem area which was identified as long ago as 1966, was the type of background from which typical group members came. The majority of the original members of the local consumer groups were *Which?* Readers, who were recruited via invitations in *Which?* and by direct mailings. This meant that the people who became group members were, as Eirlys Roberts, Editor of *Which?* described them in her book *Consumers*, from 'the educated middle class'. She went on to suggest that '...although the groups succeed in making consumer research penetrate deeper into the economy, by reaching prices and services at a local level, they do not succeed in spreading the idea of consumer research any wider in the population.' (Roberts, 1966 p. 195).

Conclusion

There is much information available about the projects carried out by local consumer groups in the past, and while this might be of interest to existing groups of different kinds, it needs to be made accessible in a form which makes it easy to use. The *Consumer Action Kit*, published over 20 years ago, does do this, and it might be worth making the effort to update it and put it onto the NCF website, using more up to date examples of group activity, with the support needed for groups to carry out their own consumer research. It does seem unlikely that new local consumer groups will form, since the environment has changed so much since 1962, but existing groups such as community associations, women's groups, senior citizen groups and youth groups could be encouraged to carry out local consumer research. This might just go some way to meet Eirlys's criticism about consumer research being dominated by 'the educated middle class', as well as equipping more people with the skills necessary to make rational consumer decisions.

Thankyou

I should like to thank Ken Frere, Peter Lawrence, Kathleen Moody, Sue Payne and Alma Williams for their help and cooperation.

Resources

Local Consumer Groups of Hertfordshire *Somewhere to go in Hertfordshire* (Summer 1971) Leisure Guide compiled by members of Central Hertfordshire Consumer Group, Letchworth, Hitchin, Stevenage and District Consumer Group and Watford and District Consumer Group.

NfCG/The Open University *Consumer Action Kit* (1986) Pack of four and six page leaflets spelling out how to do consumer surveys of local facilities, buying things cheaply, getting around your community, testing for quality, assessing the cleanliness of your neighbourhood and looking at medical services in your community. Starts each section with *Read about*, with feedback as to how three or four consumer groups carried out a survey, and then goes on to suggest *How would you do it?* with practical information.

NfCG *25 Years of the National Federation of Consumer Groups* (March 1988) Summarises progress under the headings Local Consumer Groups, Group Magazines, Research, Action, The Federation at Work, NfCG Campaigns, Legislation, Publications. Looks forward to celebrating NfCG's Golden Jubilee in the year 2013.

NfCG *Consumer Action in the Community* (May 1995) While acknowledging the many changes which had taken place since the consumer movement took off in the sixties, claims that there is still a need for general interest consumer groups.

NfCG *Annual Reports* 1985-6, 1986-7, 1988-9, 1989-1990, 1990-1991, 1991-1992, 1992-1993, 1993-1994, 1994-1995, 1995-1996, 1996-1997, 1997-1998, 1998-1999, 1999-2000, 2000-2001

NfCG *What is a consumer group?* 10 minute video (to be converted to DVD)

Roberts, E. *Consumers* (1966) C.A. Watts & Co. Ltd

The Open University *Consumer Decisions* (1981) A short course produced in collaboration with Consumers' Association.

Watford and District Consumer Group *Toys: the consumer's point of view* (September 1963) This first edition was apparently reviewed widely in the national press, TV and radio. It later figured in international bibliographies and has been read throughout the world.

Watford and District Consumer Group *Watford's Town Plan – a critical appraisal* (May 1964)

Watford and District Consumer Group *Best of Sentinel 1962-1967* This included the reports on Loose or packaged? A comparative survey of biscuits in local shops; The shoppers' week: a survey (whether a five-day week would be feasible); rate payment instalment plans in six local authorities; patent medicine and self-medication; a comparison of funeral charges; risks involved in door-to-door sales; problems with carry cots; feature on planned obsolescence in domestic appliances; a legal case won by a member; problems with the design of bottles and containers and a poem entitled Ode to high-speed central heating.

Watford and District Consumer Group *Sentinel*: Autumn 1962, Spring 1968, April 1969, November 1969, December 1970, April 1972 (Tenth Anniversary issue), Summer 1973, Spring 1974.

NfCG *Starting a Consumer Group: an Information Pack from the NfCG* (November 1998) Summarises typical local activities for consumer groups:

- Surveys of local goods, shops and services
- Producing guides to local facilities - eating out, leisure facilities, playgrounds and summer play schemes
- Using the local press, radio and TV to reach a wider audience
- Improving local facilities – transport, parking, access for the disabled
- Working with schools on consumer projects
- Representing the consumer view to service providers such as BT, energy suppliers and transport companies
- Co-operating with other local voluntary groups such as Age Concern and the Womens' Institute to work on consumer projects.

NB a more up-to-date version of this is available on the NCF website.

Watford and District Consumer Group *Family Leisure Guide 1968* (Summer 1968)