

Synopsis report on the results of the public consultation on developing a harmonised methodology for classifying and reporting consumer complaints across the EU

Introduction

Following the adoption of the Single Market Review, the Directorate-General for Health and Consumers (DG SANCO) has begun the development of the Consumer Markets Scoreboard. This is an annual publication presenting a set of indicators trying to facilitate the long term monitoring of the performance of consumer markets. The first part of the Consumer Markets Scoreboard aims to identify sectors that are potentially malfunctioning with respect to consumer outcomes. Consumer complaints are one of the key indicators used to screen markets since they may provide indications on markets which fail to meet consumers' indications.

However, data on consumer complaints are not available in a comparable form and are not suitable to facilitate benchmarking markets and making cross-country comparisons. The classification methodologies used by third-party bodies, such as government authorities, consumer organisations and regulators, are not fundamentally different since the goods and services available across Europe are largely the same. The available evidence suggests that a more harmonised methodology for classifying and reporting consumer complaints could be established without radical changes to the to the methodologies and classification systems of complaints handling bodies around Europe. To this end, DG SANCO has carried out a public consultation seeking stakeholders' views on developing a harmonised methodology for classifying and reporting consumer complaints across the European Union.

This short report summarises the responses received by the various stakeholders. In addition to this report, in an effort to ensure full transparency, all contributions have been published on the website of DG SANCO.

General observations

The public consultation was carried out between 11 June – 17 October, 2008. A consultation document presenting the issue was published on the "Your voice in Europe", the European Commission's single access point for online consultations. The consultation has elicited a considerable response from a wide group of stakeholders. In total the DG SANCO received around 114 responses from the following stakeholder groups:

Stakeholder group	Number of responses
Member State authorities	21
Non-governmental organisations	17
Independent authorities (regulators, ombudsmen, etc.),	25
European Consumer Centres	19
Business	32

Most responses (96) were submitted through the online questionnaire while some (18) were submitted though e-mail. The vast majority of respondents completed the online questionnaire, with some of them providing additional comments. A small minority (9) of respondents only submitted position papers.

Main findings

- The majority of respondents (85%) are bodies which collect consumer complaints and enquiries. Most of these bodies (80%) classify complaints and enquiries separately.
- Around 50% of respondents support the introduction of a voluntary system while around 30% support the introduction of an obligatory system. The rest of respondents prefer not to take any action.

Most of the respondents who expressed the opinion of taking no action are businesses. It must be stressed that, as the consultation paper specifies, any harmonisation would involve only complaints addressed to third parties and not businesses. Therefore, businesses would not have to make any changes to their complaints handling systems or bear any costs.

- More than 70% of respondents support the proposal of collection of data on complaints addressed to third parties, such as Member State authorities, consumer organisations and ombudsmen, rather than complaints made directly to businesses.
- More than 85% of respondents support the adoption of a sectoral classification. Around half support the use of COICOP¹ specifically as a base for a sectoral classification.
- Around 90% of the stakeholders are in favour of a classification specifying the nature/type of complaint (e.g. faulty good, late delivery). This would allow the identification of the root of the problems.
- The great majority of respondents (70%) favour a classification which would allow the identification of the different mediums used in transactions (e.g. internet, face-to-face).
- Respondents are evenly divided on the issue of a classification specifying the associated monetary value of goods and services with the complaint.
- Most stakeholders (60%) support a complaints classification which would indicate the type of infringement and relevant legislation. This would allow the collection of detailed information concerning the enforcement of consumer policy and other legislation and allow policy makers to take better policy action.
- The majority of stakeholders (65%) are in favour of a yearly aggregation of data.
- Concerning the cost implications related to stakeholders adapting their existing methodologies, around half of them cannot give an estimate at this stage, 30% say costs would be significant while 20% say they will not have any costs or costs will not be significant.

¹ COICOP - Classification of Individual Consumption According to Purpose. This is a classification developed and used by the United Nations and Eurostat to classify household spending