



**OFFICIAL REPORT**  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Economy and Fair Work Committee

**Wednesday 29 October 2025**

**Session 6**



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**Wednesday 29 October 2025**

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**ECONOMY AND FAIR WORK COMMITTEE**

**28<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2025, Session 6**

**CONVENER**

\*Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)

**DEPUTY CONVENER**

\*Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP)

**COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

\*Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab)

\*Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)

\*Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

\*Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con)

\*Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)

Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green)

\*Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)

\*attended

**THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:**

Sue Bompfray (Consumer Scotland)

Sam Ghibaldan (Consumer Scotland)

David Wilson (Consumer Scotland)

**CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

Anne Peat

**LOCATION**

The James Clerk Maxwell Room (CR4)



**Scottish Parliament**  
**Economy and Fair Work**  
**Committee**

*Wednesday 29 October 2025*

*[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]*

**Interests**

**The Convener (Daniel Johnson):** Good morning, and welcome, everyone, to the 29th meeting in 2025 of the Economy and Fair Work Committee. Before we hear from Consumer Scotland under our main item of business, under agenda item 1 I invite Sarah Boyack, who is joining the committee, to make a declaration of interests should she wish to do so.

**Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab):** I declare an interest in relation to my former employment at the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations. That is not directly relevant to most of the committee's work, but the issue of housing will crop up occasionally, so I want to put that on the record.

**The Convener:** Thank you. I note that we have received apologies from Lorna Slater, who is unable to be with us today.

**Decision on Taking Business in**  
**Private**

10:00

**The Convener:** Under agenda item 2, I ask for members' agreement to take agenda items 4 and 5 in private.

**Members indicated agreement.**

## Consumer Scotland

10:01

**The Convener:** We move to agenda item 3. As I said, we have representatives of Consumer Scotland with us this morning as part of our pre-budget scrutiny. I believe that Mr Wilson would like to make a brief introductory statement.

**David Wilson (Consumer Scotland):** Good morning, everyone. Thank you for the opportunity to be with you. I am the chair of the board of Consumer Scotland. I have with me Sam Ghibaldan, who is our chief executive, and Sue Bomphray, who is our director of operations and partnerships.

When we met around this time last year, consumers were facing significant challenges as a result of the cost of living crisis. Those challenges have not gone away, and focusing on designing and advocating measures to address debt and hardship remains at the top of our priority list. All our work is aimed at enhancing outcomes for consumers and delivering tangible benefits for the people of Scotland. Our advocacy is based on hard evidence and is shaped by our consumer principles. Our work also has a wider benefit of promoting and improving consumer confidence overall, which, in turn, contributes to economic growth and prosperity.

Over the past year, we have continued to build on our core activities, funded by consumer levies on energy, post and water, and we have broadened our activities across a wider range of consumer markets. We have undertaken research and made representations to the Government on a wide range of issues, including reform of the electricity market, the switch-off of radio teleswitch meters, the continuing affordability challenges that consumers face, and revisions to the regulatory and pricing controls of Royal Mail and Scottish Water.

I want to touch briefly on a couple of specific pieces of work that centre on our statutory duties, as set out in our founding legislation. First, we have sought to raise the profile of the Government's consumer duty—the duty on public bodies to take into account the interests of consumers in their strategic decision making. We have been actively working with a range of public bodies to promote the duty's implementation.

Secondly, continuing a theme that we have touched on in previous discussions, we continue to work with the Office for Product Safety and Standards on the recall of goods. I will be happy to give the committee an update on that.

Thirdly, over the past year, we have taken on a new role as the statutory advocate for heat network consumers. We have built up our capability in that area and have established an advisory function, working in partnership with Citizens Advice Scotland and Advice Direct Scotland. One of our key initiatives over the past year involved undertaking and publishing our first statutory investigation into the conversion of home heating and the market for energy efficiency products in domestic properties. The full report was published in July and we will be happy to give further information on that if you wish.

Finally, we have worked closely with other public sector partners on the new climate change framework for policy makers.

Next month, we will publish the full details of our activities in our annual report and accounts. The report will provide a comprehensive overview of our recent work and will include an update on our overall financial information and our assessment of our performance. We are particularly pleased that, this year, and for the third year running, we have been given a clean bill of health by our external auditors.

Again, I thank the committee for the invitation to be here. We will be delighted to take questions.

**The Convener:** Thank you very much. I will start with some opening questions before I bring in other members.

Why has your annual report, which you touched on, not been published yet? It is very difficult for us to carry out pre-budget scrutiny if we do not have an annual report in front of us.

**David Wilson:** I will make a brief comment and then pass over to Sue Bomphray to give you further details. The important point is that a substantial amount of work goes into the annual report. Our formal deadline is the end of the year, but we worked actively to try to complete that work as soon as possible. We completely understand your point, and we would have liked to have published the report before now. The work is now complete, and we are happy to share any information from the report, but I understand the concern that you have raised.

**The Convener:** In your annual report last year, you stated that one of your primary risks relates to stability of funding from the Scottish Government. Given that you will produce your annual report a matter of weeks before the Scottish Government will introduce its budget, how is the Scottish Government supposed to set its budget with confidence if it does not know how you have estimated your performance in the previous financial year?

**David Wilson:** We have actively engaged with the Scottish Government on the development of our annual report. The Government has seen all its content and the details of our performance assessment—it has seen all that information. The final document, which has been through an external audit and been approved through Audit Scotland's processes, has not yet been finalised for publication, but we have certainly worked actively with the Government on the detail.

**The Convener:** However, you understand that that makes it very difficult for us to carry out our scrutiny.

**David Wilson:** I do.

**Sue Bomphray (Consumer Scotland):** It has been a frustrating process for us this year. All our work on the accounts was completed in time for our audit and risk committee meeting on 23 September. Unfortunately, unforeseen delays on the part of our external auditors, Deloitte, led to a four-week delay in publishing our accounts. The accounts were signed last week and have been sent to Audit Scotland, which has advised that the current turnaround time is two weeks. Once we have approval from Audit Scotland, we will publish the accounts.

**The Convener:** Mr Wilson, you stated that your key focus is on outcomes for consumers in Scotland. Consumer Scotland's statutory aims are to reduce harm to consumers, to increase consumer confidence, to increase the extent to which consumer matters are taken into account by public bodies, to promote sustainable practices in the use of goods by consumers and to otherwise advance wellbeing. There is a heavy emphasis on consumers, but how do you measure those outcomes? In your annual report last year, there is an awful lot of articulation of outputs but not necessarily any measures of outcomes for consumers.

**David Wilson:** Thank you for giving me the opportunity to give you some further details. Our annual report includes a substantial section on that. In December 2023, we published a performance framework that sets out a number of ways in which we measure our impact and performance. The past year was the first full year in which that performance framework was in operation, and that is what is covered in the annual report.

Our performance framework covers four broad areas. As an advocacy organisation, our role is to influence and to seek to make a difference for consumers by advocating on their behalf. Over the past year, we have made about 200 recommendations to public bodies, the Scottish Government, the United Kingdom Government,

utility regulators, businesses and others in industry.

The first part of our four-point performance framework is about monitoring what happens in relation to each of those recommendations, which cover a number of areas. We have made recommendations in areas in which we have expertise in modelling and economic analysis. With other recommendations, we seek to act as a voice for consumers in areas in which they would not otherwise have one. We have made a number of recommendations on the provision of advice and information. Finally, we have a particular role relating to fairness, so we have made recommendations in support of the particular needs of particular groups of consumers. That is a key part of our activity. Therefore, the first part of our performance framework involves monitoring our recommendations and assessing their impact on other organisations.

The second part involves what we call impact assessment reviews, of which some committee members will be aware. In the academic world, universities do impact case studies for particular themes, which involves charting how a piece of research was done and considering its impact on public policy or how it has fed into other work. We have tried to do something similar with a group of our recommendations. This year, we assessed what we have done in relation to climate change and the transition from traditional land lines to the use of internet and broadband-based communication. We have already published the detail of those assessment reviews.

Thirdly, we monitor the various workstreams that we publish. We publish an annual work plan, we monitor individual workstreams, and we assess how we have done on each of them in our annual report.

Finally, on your point about output measures, we fully recognise the need to have a balance of outcomes and output measures. We have a set of organisational activity measures on matters such as the number of news releases, the number of published reports, our engagement events and our social media impact, as you would expect, and we report on that.

A combination of those outcomes, impact assessments and activity indicators gives us a picture of how we are doing as an organisation.

**The Convener:** I will come on to those points about engagement. From your response, it sounds as though you are measuring your influence on other parts of the public sector as an outcome, but are not measuring benefits to consumers. I think that most people would describe the former as an output rather than an outcome. In your opening statement, you described your objective as

creating benefits to consumers in Scotland, but nothing in your answer really describes such benefits, unless I am missing something.

**David Wilson:** I think that we certainly make an impact that leads to benefits for consumers. We are an advocacy organisation. We have a statutory function to provide advice to the UK and Scottish Governments. We have a role in providing information, research and analysis. We do not have enforcement powers. We are not a regulatory body in the sense that bodies such as the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets, Ofcom and Trading Standards Scotland are.

We see our role as seeking to influence how other organisations perform their duties, and to be an advocate and a voice for consumers that can link their different needs, whether that is on energy, water, post or other consumer matters, and to try to draw comparisons and links. We achieve benefits for consumers by influencing others. That is how we were set up; that is what we do.

10:15

**The Convener:** That is how you assess your output. Again, what I have to go off is last year's annual report rather than this year's report. On page 15, you outline some of your publications and outputs. It states that you produced only 34 publications, which is just more than one publication per employee in your organisation. Of those publications, nine were press releases and two were blog posts. The figures for your website interactions show just under 19,000 total views, and between 3,000 and 4,000 unique users, with an average engagement time of two minutes. You are judging yourself on your influence. Even if that concerns your influence on other organisations, not even 4,000 people in Scotland are using your information. Is that a sign of success, and will this year's annual report show substantial improvement on those figures?

**David Wilson:** Yes, it will. That indicates both an improvement and our evolution and growth as an organisation. We have been in place for three years. We are growing and developing. By way of comparison—again, I recognise that, in an ideal world, you would have had our updated numbers—over the past year, we published 91 reports, issued 23 news releases, had 70,000 views on our website and held 15 engagement events with consumers.

Two other things are perhaps particularly important. As part of the monitoring that I set out earlier, we seek to monitor the number of times that we are, in university speak, cited in parliamentary and Government documents—in other words, where a Government or a regulator

has said that they have been influenced by or have recognised the contribution that we have made. There are 40 such citations.

Our investigation work had the single-biggest impact of any of our activities over the past year. The announcement of our recommendations in the “Converting Scotland’s Home Heating” report had substantial broadcast and newspaper coverage. We estimate that there were more than 7 million opportunities for people to view us in the wider media. That is an example of how, now that we are fully up and running as an organisation, we can make a substantial impact that is widely recognised, acknowledged and heard by consumers, stakeholders and decision makers, not just in Scotland but across the UK.

**The Convener:** How many unique visitors to your website does that equate to?

**David Wilson:** Seventy thousand.

**The Convener:** No—that sounds like the number of views. It does not matter.

**David Wilson:** Are you asking about individual views, or—

**The Convener:** In the previous year's annual report, 18,767 views translated to 3,786 unique users. Maybe you could come back to us with that figure, but it is not important.

**David Wilson:** We are just checking the numbers now.

**The Convener:** At this point, I will hand over to Gordon MacDonald.

**Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP):** I have a couple of questions, but I want to start by asking about the annual report. I want to have this clear in my mind. Last year's annual report was published on 17 October 2024. The publication of this year's report is being delayed by four weeks. Is that because of internal pressure in Deloitte, or is it a problem with your own audit? What is the reason for the delay? As the convener has indicated, our role is very difficult when we do not see the latest annual report and we have to rely on something that is completely out of date.

**Sue Bomphray:** We completely understand that. The delay has been on Deloitte's side. All our field work was completed in August. We had our draft international standard on auditing 260 audit report from Deloitte at the beginning of September, and we were ready to present it to our audit and risk committee and the board on 23 September to recommend for signing. However, Deloitte then had some internal pressures and its final reviews could not be completed in time for that board meeting. We received the final version the week before last, and the report was signed last Wednesday.

**Gordon MacDonald:** Okay. Deloitte's 2023-24 report on Consumer Scotland highlighted that the organisation had not developed a long-term plan covering five to 10 years ahead, and that you were to have that ready by quarter 4 of 2024-25. Will you update us on where you are on that?

**Sue Bomphray:** Yes. We have a 10-year plan now, which has been seen by the auditors and reviewed as part of the evidence for the annual report and accounts.

We have not published it, but we are using our 10-year plan to factor into the discussions that we are having with the Scottish Government about next year's budget. We also have a regular challenge on the plan with both the audit and risk committee and the board, certainly around scenario planning and understanding what we would do in the event of any funding challenges beyond what we have already.

**Gordon MacDonald:** I will move on to two topics on which I have raised questions with you in the past. One is about product recall. You said that you had an update to give us. In our previous discussions on that, you said that you did not want to duplicate the Office for Product Safety and Standards' database. I accept that. I had a look at the database this morning. It has nearly 3,000 items on it and, since 2025, 360 items that could cause serious harm to consumers have been notified. I know that there is a link to the OPSS on your website. You also have a Twitter account. The latest notification on the danger of electrocution from a vacuum cleaner had 103 hits. Are you doing enough to publicise to the people of Scotland that there is the risk of serious harm from some consumer products when you are getting 103 hits for such notifications?

**Sue Bomphray:** Further to last year's conversation, we have done a lot more work and continue to work with OPSS. There are a couple of key points to draw out from that. One is that we are working with OPSS on the functionality of the website, because I think—

**Gordon MacDonald:** It is terrible.

**Sue Bomphray:** Yes—it is not very easy to navigate and it is not very consumer friendly. The OPSS's main mechanism for promulgating information has been through other bodies, such as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents or other specific organisations that promulgate information to interested parties. We have been doing workshops with the OPSS. It is redeveloping the database, and we expect to get a more user-friendly one by next summer. In addition, OPSS will be carrying out interviews with various stakeholders on the design of the database so that it takes them into account.

We will also be running a bespoke public information campaign on local radio and social media during the black Friday and Christmas period this year. That is about to launch. We hope that the campaign will encourage consumers to register electrical goods. We know that a lot of consumers do not register such goods when they get them. That might be because the documentation often involves scanning a QR code, which is a process that not everyone is familiar with, particularly vulnerable consumers.

As you mentioned, we have done targeted social media posts and posts on our website about specific products, notably on LED glowsticks, travel adapters and hair straighteners. Some of those have had up to 1,300 views.

**Gordon MacDonald:** Not in the past four months, they have not, because I have just wandered through your Twitter account. You would be lucky if you hit 600.

**Sue Bomphray:** Sam Ghibaldan will correct me if I am wrong, but I think that we are not using Twitter so much now but are using Bluesky.

**Sam Ghibaldan (Consumer Scotland):** We will—[Inaudible.]—but I think that there has been a significant downfall in Twitter activity—and not just with us.

**Gordon MacDonald:** Yes, there has been, but you have no presence on Bluesky.

**Sam Ghibaldan:** We are on Bluesky.

**Gordon MacDonald:** You have a Bluesky account, but it does not have product recall information on it, and you have no Facebook page. You put out press releases. I know that you cannot issue those for every product recall, but there have been 361 product recalls of a serious nature so far in 2025, which is around one per day. It is not beyond the wit of man to tweet, to post on Facebook and on Bluesky or to issue a press release on every one of those. We are talking about one product recall a day. I would not have thought that to be onerous. What are you doing to highlight to the public that there are serious problems with some products?

**Sue Bomphray:** The campaign will highlight the database and where to go to find information, and then we want to build on that. It is reasonable to expect that we promulgate information more, as well as ensure that people are attached to those channels so that they can see those updates and that we continue to use third sector organisations' tools to promulgate those messages.

**Gordon MacDonald:** Okay. Before passing back to the convener, I will ask about your investigatory work. I know that the organisation became operational only in 2022, but you highlighted in our previous discussions that you

wanted to have one or two investigations a year. You have produced only one, and you have announced a second one. Where are we with that, and how will you ratchet that up?

**Sam Ghibaldan:** We spent some time thinking through how our investigations function should develop and operate. We set up the function and the first investigation was launched last year. We published the results in June. It is a thorough process that takes time, and we have only two people in our investigations team. There are resource and capacity limitations.

Yesterday, we were pleased to announce a second investigation on used cars. Both the subjects that we have picked so far are big ones that take time to investigate. We have to go through a lot of evidence. We go through a lot of stakeholder engagement—our legislation requires us to be very collaborative in how we conduct investigations and work with stakeholders.

Our plan is that the second investigation will be completed by around spring next year. We will have to take into account the timing of the election, but we will probably publish the investigation report shortly after it.

**Gordon MacDonald:** How do you decide which subjects to look at?

**Sam Ghibaldan:** We have a fairly rigorous prioritisation process. We consider factors such as whether there is a high level of harm for consumers or whether there is a lower level of harm but the issue affects many more consumers. We also consider whether there are opportunities for us to influence on the back of an investigation, as well as whether other people are active and doing things in that area.

There are a number of criteria to consider. We also feed off our own evidence research about the impact of consumer detriment, for example. You will be aware of the consumer detriment survey that the Competition and Markets Authority ran earlier this year. We funded a Scottish boost for that survey to get additional data for the consumer impact in Scotland. That is an example of the evidence that we use. The investigation that we announced yesterday is on the used car market, which the survey found generated the second-highest area of consumer detriment.

**Gordon MacDonald:** Okay. Thanks very much.

**The Convener:** Before I bring in our deputy convener, Murdo Fraser has a supplementary question.

**Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** Good morning. I want to follow up on Gordon MacDonald's line of questioning about your public reach. My colleague was just getting to highlighting the concern, which many of us share,

that Consumer Scotland's profile with the wider public is not great.

I have been looking at the numbers on your social media reach. On X, Consumer Scotland is followed by 408 people. Your post from yesterday, on consumer protections in the used car market, has had 43 views since it went up. To put that into context, another consumer organisation with which people might be familiar is Which? UK, which has 123,600 followers on X. I know that X is not the beginning and end of the world, but that difference in numbers suggests that you are not really reaching people in the way that other consumer organisations are able to.

**David Wilson:** I will come in first, and perhaps Sam Ghibaldan could follow up.

First, we seek to complement what other consumer advocacy organisations are doing. Rather than aiming to establish ourselves as another Which? or another Citizens Advice Scotland, we want to work in partnership with them. Much of our work seeks to complement, elevate and enhance their activities and to provide research analysis to enable them to advocate alongside us. The important point is that we are not trying to replicate their work; we want to work with them.

With regard to product recall and a range of other issues, including our advocacy on debt and financial hardship, we very much work in partnership with other organisations—in particular, Citizens Advice Scotland and Advice Direct Scotland, which have a well-established public presence, brand awareness and direct impact. We work in partnership with them and are not trying to replace them.

10:30

A particular consequence of our work over the past year is that the Scottish Government now looks to us to fund both Citizens Advice Scotland and Advice Direct Scotland, and it provides us with funding to work with partner bodies to boost their advocacy. Such joint working is another mechanism for boosting our wider impact. We do not expect our Twitter account—or our X account, as it is now called—to be the router or the main mechanism for our advocacy. It reports on our work rather than forming a piece of advocacy in itself. However, we certainly work alongside others.

As a final point on the announcement that we made yesterday, our communications team has been working hard to build up our stakeholder list. Members might have seen coverage of our announcement in the broadsheet, tabloid and broadcast media. Making joint announcements with endorsements from Advice Direct Scotland

and the Scottish Motor Trade Association is impactful. Through such working partnerships we look to others to communicate what we are doing as well as doing so ourselves directly.

Sam, would you like to add to that?

**Sam Ghibaldan:** As David said, our work is about influencing. It is very important to us that we are measured and balanced in how we present ourselves in public—in the media and in public forums. What we say is based on evidence. That helps us to be influential with regulators, Governments, other organisations and businesses.

Although we are not a campaigning organisation in the strict sense, we have achieved significant media coverage of a number of issues that we have highlighted. For example, we managed significant coverage of our first investigation into the radio teleswitch switch-off and on the digital switchover, as well as on our reporting on consumer attitudes to net zero issues. Therefore, I think that we have made an impact in the media. We can always build on that by doing more, and I am keen to do so. The more that we can promote such issues, the better.

Another key aspect is the conducting of consumer information campaigns, which, as the committee will know, is part of our function. Last year, there were budget restriction issues on marketing—as there were on public funding in general, with which our budgets were aligned. However, we were able to fund Trading Standards Scotland's television campaign called shut out scammers, which I think reached more than 2 million consumers. Every year, we fund the big energy savings activity run by Citizens Advice Scotland, which also reaches many consumers.

As Sue Bomphray mentioned, we are about to launch our own consumer information campaigns, working with OPSS, on the recall of goods and on encouraging people to register products. We plan to do more of that activity. We are constrained by a lack of resources, but we want to do more. We are developing a track record on that and learning how to do it.

**Murdo Fraser:** Thank you.

**Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP):** Good morning, and thank you for joining us. I want to pick up on the thread on social media activity that my colleagues Gordon MacDonald and Murdo Fraser started.

I looked up Consumer Scotland's footprint on LinkedIn. I did so because, although LinkedIn is changing, it is still largely considered to be a place for people in small and large businesses to connect. I was very surprised to see that I had only one connection with Consumer Scotland. I

have thousands of connections on LinkedIn. I would have expected Consumer Scotland to have reached out to many people involved in business, so I am surprised that there was only one connection with me. I saw, too, that you have just 839 followers on LinkedIn.

That makes me wonder how on earth you will achieve the reach that you will need if you are to support small businesses, which is one of your focuses for the year ahead. LinkedIn is an extremely powerful tool, not just in making connections and targeting people; in recent years, its overall functionality has increased. My question is similar to those of my colleagues. In light of the work that you have planned for this year, do you plan to increase your presence on LinkedIn and use the platform more effectively to reach small businesses?

**Sam Ghibaldan:** Yes. We already have a significant presence on LinkedIn. I note what you say, and it is a reasonable comment.

We consistently promote our activities in that forum. I am slightly surprised that you had only one connection to us, but I cannot really get into that without knowing what that is. We connect and engage with the key people whom we seek to influence on LinkedIn and in other forums, in meetings and through other kinds of engagement. We regularly meet most of our stakeholders.

**Michelle Thomson:** Citizens Advice Scotland, which you referenced, has 9,000 followers on LinkedIn, whereas you have only 839. That begs a question, which other committee members have asked, about your role in influencing others. My honest question is: if Consumer Scotland were to disappear tomorrow, who would notice and who would care? I do not say that to be rude—I am genuinely asking who would know.

**David Wilson:** I recognise the challenge posed by your question. The important points that we draw attention to are areas where we have established a combination of expertise, influence and impact, which are key ones relevant to consumer harm and detriment. We have touched on our investigations into used cars and into home heating, both of which have the potential to significantly influence both wider regulation and how the Government progresses policy in those areas.

As for what would be noticed if we were not there, I hope that it would be our influence in the home heating area. One of the most substantial components of the transition to net zero is how we are transforming the heating of our domestic buildings. We have established a particular combination of expertise, impact and influence in that area, which I think would be missed.

Our influence is perhaps wider in other areas. Through our work alongside the Water Industry Commission for Scotland and Scottish Water, we champion the interests of water consumers who increasingly face challenges that can lead to water poverty. I have already touched on energy and on the RTS meter switch-off. We have made an impact in a number of areas that would not have happened in our absence. In that sense, our absence would be noticed, and I think that we are becoming increasingly established.

**Michelle Thomson:** If I might interrupt for a minute, Sam Ghibaldan mentioned the RTS switch-off earlier. That was something that vexed my office a great deal, because many people in the Braes area in Falkirk East were concerned that they would be affected. I had extensive engagement with suppliers to make sure that the process would happen seamlessly.

I have recently checked my emails and, unless I am wrong—I am happy to be corrected—I did not receive any contact from Consumer Scotland. I see that Stephen Kerr is nodding in agreement. I would guess that, as a list MSP for that area, he also had a lot of contact from consumers there. I did not get any emails from yourselves to outline the work that you were doing, but I know that my office definitely did a great deal of work on the RTS switch-off because it was a big concern for people in the Braes. You specifically referenced that issue but, as a constituency MSP, I was not able to detect any influence or impact from yourselves on the issue.

**Sam Ghibaldan:** I will perhaps come in on that. We have been very active on the RTS issue. Last year, or possibly the end of the year before, we organised a round-table meeting with suppliers and many of the energy consumer groups such as Advice Direct Scotland and Ofgem, at which we highlighted our concern that, around 18 months before the switch-off was due to happen, insufficient progress was being made. We have engaged regularly with Ofgem and suppliers on that. I will have to double check, but I am pretty sure that we featured the RTS issue in at least one of the newsletters that we send to MSPs and MPs. I will check that and come back to the committee.

When it became apparent, in June this year, that the switch-off date was running into trouble, I wrote to the chief executive of Ofgem to ask for a number of reassurances. One was that the areas with the most RTS meters—for example, the north of Scotland—would not be switched off first, so that lessons could be learned in the process. I was pleased that that approach was taken eventually.

There were various concerns about consumers not getting meter appointments and whether suppliers had robust plans in place to mitigate any loss of heat or hot water supply. In particular, there

was concern that consumers should not have to pay remedial costs for rewiring or replacing cabinets, which, historically, are behind-the-meter costs for which suppliers are not responsible. We have been pressing Ofgem on that and it is now working with the Energy Saving Trust on using remedial energy funds to support consumers on those aspects.

We have made an impact by ensuring that consumers were protected, given the supplier failure that resulted from not reaching the RTS switch-off date and from the UK Government and Ofgem not recognising sufficiently early that there was a looming problem.

**Michelle Thomson:** You gave the example of a round-table meeting held about 18 months ago. You are right that the switch-off was clearly a burgeoning issue as long ago as that. I had picked up on that, too. I had no awareness of your work at that point, yet I had already determined that the switch-off was a significant issue for people in my constituency.

My point is that, based on what you have just described, you felt that you were doing a great deal of work and were seeking to make a difference, but I did not know about it. It might have been expected that members of this committee, in particular—given our alignment and my constituency interests—would have known about it. That plays into our comment about a general lack of awareness about what you are doing and about your social media footprint.

**David Wilson:** I very much welcome this discussion. The RTS switch-off is a good example of a strong link between what we have been trying to achieve—clearly, that has happened alongside others; we are not trying to take sole credit for it—and a substantial difference eventually being made in that area. Hearing from you that we should have done more to communicate what we are doing—not so much after the event, but in real time—represents a good and welcome challenge.

Sam Ghibaldan mentioned the letter that he sent at the end of May, which set out what seemed to be a looming crisis. Along with other organisations, we were concerned that people's supplies would be switched off and that there would be serious consequences at the end of June. To the credit of everyone involved, that situation was resolved. Sam's letter contained a comprehensive assessment of what the regulator should be doing and the work that it should be taking forward. I think that we published the letter at the time, but on reflection perhaps we could have done more to circulate it both among MSPs and more widely. However, it is an indicator of the advocacy work that we do in real time as opposed to after the event. There is no doubt in my mind

that we made a substantial difference in that area and in many others.

10:45

**Michelle Thomson:** I say to the convener that I am aware of time, but I want to ask about plans for this year.

You outlined your plan to look at markets that deliver for small businesses. I want to understand what you thought your primary focus might be within that, specifically rather than generally, because small businesses have fewer protections and rights. One example of that is around banking and commercial contracts, which, for small businesses, are classified as contracts of equals if they have a commercial loan. Those go through the Financial Conduct Authority, so you will not be able to do all that much about that area. There is already some provision in place for utilities, too. I am not clear what you thought you would be able to do for small businesses, and it would be useful to understand more about your plans.

**David Wilson:** I can add to the picture that you have very clearly presented. We did some focused research with small businesses over the past year and both identified and documented the particular insight that small businesses are consumers in their own right. They face many, if not all, of the same challenges that individual consumers face. Small businesses face challenges of size, the lack of bargaining power in markets and the lack of a unified voice as consumers. They face the same challenges but, in many ways, have significantly less protections than consumers.

The report and the work that we have done in that area have drawn out and built on that insight. Initially, we identified areas on which we are advocating with the utility regulators on behalf of small businesses that use water—so all of them—and energy. We are advocating for better understanding and awareness on the part of the utility companies and the regulators of the challenges that small businesses face, better codes of conduct and the development of standards of service for small businesses. The more we look into it, the more we recognise that there is significant mileage in developing regulation within the utility sectors with an eye to small businesses, which is an area that has perhaps not been given enough attention in the past. We are on side with that insight and with what you are getting at, and we think that we can take that forward generally for small businesses.

I can make a link with some specifics. We have done substantial work on parcels. The delivery of parcels on behalf of small businesses by parcel companies is as much a business issue as it is a final user issue. The used car investigation will

draw out some of the challenges facing smaller operators and car dealerships. Woven through all our work is our desire to make sure that the small business angle is seen as being as important as the final consumer angle.

**Michelle Thomson:** My final question comes from an efficiency and effectiveness perspective. You have tie-ups with Citizens Advice Scotland and others. Would it not be more efficient to give the money to the Federation of Small Businesses, the Institute of Directors or one of the business representative organisations, which, I know, will look at these areas within a much wider remit?

**David Wilson:** At a more general level, we are keen to build our links with the FSB. We have had good links with the federation in the past—it has been represented on our consumer network with stakeholders and organisations that are involved in consumer advocacy. If we can do more partnership working with the business representative organisations to communicate and work with small businesses, we would be very keen to do so.

**Sam Ghibaldan:** I can add to that. Our research on small businesses will be published in the next couple of weeks. We worked very closely with the FSB on it. The FSB has been involved in helping us to identify some of the areas and topics that we need to look at and we have a very helpful partnership with it.

The report shows that the two biggest areas that small businesses had issues with as consumers were the energy and water sectors. We have made recommendations for both of those areas, which have been successful and had impact, through working with licensed providers in the water market and with the Water Industry Commission for Scotland. We chaired a working group that resulted in the first code of conduct in the non-domestic market in water. It has been in force since April and is operated by WICS. We will be looking at doing some research on the operation of that code in a few months to see whether any lessons can be learned to improve it, but we are pleased that we have been the prime mover in many ways in getting that into place, which is helping to protect small businesses.

We have also made recommendations to the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, which consulted on third-party intermediaries in the energy market. We recommended a hybrid approach to regulation of third-party intermediaries. DESNZ had been proposing a very limited model and we proposed a hybrid approach. I am pleased to say that although that did not feature in DESNZ's initial consultation, the department has adopted it and will be proceeding with it. In essence, that means that small businesses will be able to access tools such as

price comparison sites, but also that where the third-party intermediaries have more risky services that might take control of people's money and things like that, there will be much more stringent regulation, which is very much what we pushed for.

**Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** Michelle Thomson's questions captured the spirit and mood of the committee this morning. In your opening statement, David Wilson, you said that your role was about improving consumer confidence, yet the Scottish consumer sentiment indicator for quarter 2 is minus 8.9. What has the indicator been over the three and a half years that you have existed?

**David Wilson:** Clearly, consumer confidence is a broad measure and it is impacted by a wide range of factors. Where we can make a difference is with consumers' confidence in making purchases, in the sense that they feel confident that they have the information to make an informed judgment on what they want to purchase, that they actually get what they pay for and that, if something is not right or goes wrong, they have redress and can deal with it. That is the area that we can work on. We cannot influence macroeconomic factors.

**Stephen Kerr:** You said in your opening statement that improving consumer confidence is part of your *raison d'être*. If the Scottish consumer sentiment indicator is at minus 8.9 for quarter 2 this year, where has it been previously? What has been the trend over the past three and a half years?

**David Wilson:** I do not have the numbers for that trend. It has been weak for a number of years, which reflects wider economic circumstances and wider changes in markets. In addition, consumers have increased concern about how they engage in markets, particularly in relation to the shift to online markets. We recognise that there are widespread feelings of consumer detriment across the market.

**Stephen Kerr:** I am asking these questions simply to try to understand your key performance indicators. What unit of measurement justifies the existence of Consumer Scotland? Is consumer confidence one of the indicators? Are there other indicators that would tell us whether or not Consumer Scotland has an impact?

**David Wilson:** Improving consumer confidence is the ultimate outcome that we are aiming to achieve. It is very difficult to attribute our contribution to that outcome within the wide range of other possible factors.

**Stephen Kerr:** So it is not a very good KPI for Consumer Scotland.

**David Wilson:** We would not use the consumer detriment survey as an indicator of our performance.

**Stephen Kerr:** What would you use?

**David Wilson:** Earlier, I tried to describe our impact in particular areas. We would measure our impact through the impact assessment reviews that we are undertaking, the work in our work plan on particular areas, and the recommendations that we have made that have been taken into account by regulators and Government.

On the outcomes for consumers, it would be very difficult to assess our impact on consumers in the aggregate. If I may go back to our investigation earlier this year, we made nine recommendations in a substantial report that identified—not just for the Scottish Government, although perhaps particularly for the Scottish Government—the substantial improvements that need to be put in place around accreditation, consumer information, licensing and regulation of the home heating market. If those improvements are not put in place, we will end up with the same huge disappointment and consumer harm that came from the solid wall insulation market under the UK Government's energy company obligation scheme, which the National Audit Office reported on recently.

We can make a difference by preventing that sort of problem, and that is where we think that our investigations can make a difference. If we can nudge even slightly the high level of concerns, complaints and consumer harm in the used car market, we will think that we have made a difference. That is how we would measure our performance.

**Stephen Kerr:** I respect that answer, of course. You used the plural "investigations", but in three and a half years, you have done one and you have announced a second—you have given yourself a deadline for the second investigation. I was intrigued by the chief executive saying that it took you a long time to understand—I think that he said this—how to conduct an investigation. There are many bodies with a long history of conducting investigations that we can borrow the learning from, so I do not understand that. In fact, if I am honest, I did not understand your answer.

**David Wilson:** I may ask Sam to add to this, but the important thing is that we wanted to take a very deliberate and thoughtful approach to how to undertake the investigation. Remember that it was a statutory investigation, using our powers. We could have done investigations—perhaps lower-case investigations—fairly quickly, but we wanted to take a very deliberate and thoughtful approach. We took advice and benefited greatly from a secondment from the Competition and Markets

Authority of one of its experienced investigators to help develop the framework. I think that we did very much what you would expect us to do, and that has led to the process that we now have in place.

We would be pleased to do more investigations. If we can get to doing a couple a year, we would like to do that. I am not trying to have a discussion here about resources, but we have to recognise what resources we have. We want to be deliberate and impactful in our investigations, rather than take a light touch and produce a list of recommendations that perhaps gets lost. We want to have a real impact.

**Stephen Kerr:** On the issue of resources, you have 28 permanent staff. Is that still correct? That was the number in the previous annual report.

**David Wilson:** That number has grown.

**Stephen Kerr:** Has it grown? What is it now?

**Sam Ghibaldan:** It is now 41.

**Stephen Kerr:** You now have 41 permanent staff.

**David Wilson:** The number has increased principally because of the additional functions that we have taken on over the past year. I mentioned the heat advocacy area. That is a new statutory responsibility. The increases that we have made are due to the additional functions and activities that both the UK and Scottish Governments have put on us.

11:00

**Stephen Kerr:** That is a lot of permanent staff to do one investigation in three and a half years. It is a lot of resource. I also note that, in each of the first two years—we do not have any more data than this—there were underspends. The issue of resource is leading to questions.

**David Wilson:** I will perhaps ask Sam Ghibaldan to give you an update on our staffing and then bring Sue Bomphray in on the financial aspects in that respect.

**Stephen Kerr:** Yes, that would be helpful. Can you understand where I am coming from?

**Sam Ghibaldan:** Yes, absolutely, but—

**The Convener:** If you bring in 13 staff, on a baseline of 28, that is an increase of almost 50 per cent. Could you explain that 50 per cent increase in capacity and the breakdown of those roles?

**Sam Ghibaldan:** Yes. You need to remember that we have been a developing organisation for the past two or three years. We have deliberately built as we have gone along. We have studied the

areas that we are operating in to understand what we need.

As David Wilson mentioned, we have taken on some additional functions over the past year. We have had additional levy funding for heat networks. We have an advocacy function around that. We are also funding heat networks advice that is provided by Citizens Advice Scotland and Advice Direct Scotland. We have a grant funding mechanism, and we have taken on roles from the Scottish Government in relation to funding the advice bodies in that respect as well—we grant fund the activities that they undertake, such as the consumer helpline.

We have taken on additional functions. Growth has always been part of our plan as we have grown into being a mature organisation, if you like. That is the context in which those numbers have grown.

**David Wilson:** Sue Bomphray will touch on the point about underspends at year end.

**Sue Bomphray:** Yes. In the first couple of years, one challenge has been getting the function set up quickly. We did not have an investigations function initially because we took the time to decide what we wanted to do. We now have two people in that function.

The increases in staff that we have had over the past year are almost entirely from the funding that we get from the Department for Business and Trade in relation to our work on electricity, gas and heat networks. That is where those headcounts have come; they have not come in the areas that are funded by the Scottish Government.

Particularly in relation to heat networks, approval for our budget from the Department for Business and Trade last year was not received until September. Therefore, by the time that we recruited, we ended up with an underspend because we had those roles funded for the year but were unable to recruit to them until September in that year. We are always striving to get the best value for the public purse, but we are also realistic about the time that it takes to recruit for new functions and to get approval for our budget, not from the Scottish Government but from the other funders.

**Stephen Kerr:** The convener asked specific questions, but I am not sure we have had specific answers. Maybe you can send further detail to the convener, on behalf of the committee, so that we can see more of the specifics.

You now have 41 permanent staff. Did I hear that correctly? From what I understand, I presume that you have also had temporary staff on top of that. Is that correct?

**Sam Ghibaldan:** We have a small number of temporary staff, yes.

**Stephen Kerr:** Again, we want to know the detail of that. [*Interruption.*] Sorry, convener, are you coming in?

**The Convener:** Can I briefly follow up? You have had an increase in staff of almost 50 per cent. Has the value of your grants to external organisations increased by 50 per cent?

**David Wilson:** We are now funded by the Scottish Government to fund other organisations, and you can take it that the value of the grants certainly have not increased by 50 per cent. To emphasise the point, the increase in the numbers was for an additional function that we were given, as opposed to on-going funding of our activity.

We can provide the full details of our headcount, the funding income and the flows out to Advice Direct Scotland and Citizens Advice Scotland. I am happy to provide that later.

**Sam Ghibaldan:** This is the first year that we have funded Advice Direct Scotland's advice line. In the previous year, it was funded by the Scottish Government.

**Stephen Kerr:** Right. Obviously, lots of questions would follow on from further information, including from your annual report, which we do not have.

There is a requirement in the Consumer Scotland legislation for an independent review of the performance of Consumer Scotland. It is, I suppose, timely to ask about that, given the line of questioning this morning. When is the review due? Has it been commissioned and, if so, who are the independent reviewers?

**David Wilson:** We are in the process of implementing that now. We have agreed—and the board has agreed—a remit, which sets out what we expect that review to cover. It is very much about looking at our development as an organisation, whether we have put in place an—

**Stephen Kerr:** Can we see that?

**David Wilson:** We would be happy to share the remit.

We are seeking a reviewer or an organisation that can undertake that review, and we intend to have it commissioned and completed by the end of the financial year.

**Stephen Kerr:** Were you not required to have commissioned it by April of this year?

**David Wilson:** If I remember correctly, the requirement was to commission the review as soon as possible after the end of the year. One factor—

**Stephen Kerr:** Not by April?

**David Wilson:** No, it was not by April. It was from April, if you like—as soon as possible after April.

We wanted to make sure that a reviewer had access to our full financial and performance information, so we thought that it would be better in the latter half of the year rather than the first half.

**Stephen Kerr:** I have probably taken too much time already, but I have one last question, which is in relation to the consumer duty. You have a role to play in relation to the requirement for consumer duty being borne in mind by public sector bodies. The requirement came into force in April 2024, but has only been fully active as of the spring of this year, in April 2025. We are now in October—nearly in November. What have you been doing to see that the duty that rests on public bodies is being fulfilled?

**Sue Bomphray:** We published the final guidance in February 2025. Before then, we had interim guidance in place with a consultation running alongside it. Since then, we have undertaken a number of information sessions with around 40 public bodies, including the Government, local authorities, health boards and regulators. We have delivered 10 bespoke webinars to public bodies at senior decision-maker level, as well as information sessions across the five Scottish Government director general areas. We have also run a number of really popular sessions for small businesses and third-sector organisations to help them to strengthen their influence, so we continue to raise awareness.

It is quite early on in the process to determine how well it is working. We do not have a formal role in monitoring—our duty was to publish the guidance, which we have done—but we are interested in and committed to making sure that this works for consumers and drives the right actions.

**Stephen Kerr:** Are you not monitoring the implementation of the duty?

**Sue Bomphray:** We do not have a formal role in monitoring its effectiveness. However, we would like to do that. When all the annual reports and accounts for 2024-25 are published, we aim to carry out an analysis, in the first instance, to see what bodies have been doing in relation to the consumer duty and also to look at the impact assessments that they publish. We hope to then make recommendations on the basis of that as to whether the process has been effective.

**Stephen Kerr:** Is that how you will determine whether public bodies are living up to the consumer duty?

**Sue Bomphray:** Yes, we believe so.

**Stephen Kerr:** Right, okay. Will that be visible?

**Sue Bomphray:** Yes, it will be, once we have done that. The guidance is there already. Organisations need to publish any consumer duty impact assessments that they do and also reference the consumer duty in their annual reports and accounts.

**Stephen Kerr:** Okay. Again, lots of questions come from that, but I recognise that I am probably past my time, so that is fine.

**Sue Bomphray:** I am happy to take any questions offline if you need more information.

**David Wilson:** To complete that discussion, at least for now, we see the consumer duty as potentially being quite a radical change in how public bodies work, as I said last year. It is a tool to enhance effectiveness. It is public service reform around effectiveness rather than perhaps just being about financial efficiency.

As Sue Bomphray has clearly described, our role has been about guidance and advice. I think that there is a next stage, which is about monitoring and, ultimately, enforcement, to an extent. That is not what our legislation says but I think that it is an area that will evolve. The consumer duty is not only an important part of our work but an important initiative across the board.

**Stephen Kerr:** Do you see it as your job to monitor the implementation of the duty?

**David Wilson:** Formally, that lies with the Scottish Government. We have discussed it with the Scottish Government and we would be happy to take on that role but, at the moment, the monitoring and enforcement role is more with the Government.

**Stephen Kerr:** Who specifically?

**David Wilson:** With the public bodies team within the Scottish Government. I think that it would sit within Ivan McKee's area of public service reform. It is a Government area but, as I say, the conversation is on-going about whether the Government would like us to play a bigger role.

**Stephen Kerr:** So you are talking about it?

**David Wilson:** Yes.

**Sue Bomphray:** We have already built up some really good case studies and we would like to do more of that because it helps the public bodies understand how to do it well and the benefits that it brings.

**Sarah Boyack:** I want to dig into two of your key objectives in terms of consumer protection, around the environment and climate emergency

and homes. That has come up a couple of times. In your "Converting Scotland's Home Heating" report, you talk about the need for around 2 million homes in Scotland to be upgraded from old heating systems to energy-efficient ones, so there are lots of new opportunities.

I will focus on a couple of things. The first is the massive rip-offs that people have experienced with retrofits. What solutions are now in place and, for the home owners who have experienced those rip-offs, what support or compensation will they get as a result of the work that Consumer Scotland has done?

**Sam Ghibaldan:** Our investigation report, which was published in June, looked at the issues, including the fact that 2.4 million homes need to decarbonise their heating and 1.5 million homes do not have a good standard of energy efficiency.

The investigation recommendations were that the Scottish Government and the UK Government need to run national campaigns to engage consumers on the benefits of the introduction of energy performance certificates. Both Governments need to do something about what is, to be frank, the guddle of licensing schemes, accreditation schemes, consumer protection schemes and redress schemes that exists. From a consumer perspective, it is extremely hard to navigate and not at all clear.

We have therefore recommended that both Governments need to introduce mandatory accreditation standards for traders in that sector, to increase consumer confidence in it, and that the UK Government needs to simplify and consolidate the standards bodies, the consumer protection codes and the certification for low-carbon energy-efficiency measures that already exist. As you know, there are a number of different organisations in that space.

There also needs to be a streamlined, accessible and consistent consumer complaints and redress system. Again, it is about trying to create a simple and straightforward consumer journey and improving information sharing.

We are pleased to see that there has been some progress. The Scottish Government laid draft EPC regulations before Parliament about two or three weeks ago. Those regulations are quite important. They are a key step in giving consumers the information that they need to look at their own houses and work out what they need to do. We have actively engaged with the UK Government on standards of protection. I was a member of the DESNZ advisory panel on the Ofgem review over the past few months, and we highlighted the importance of more streamlined and effective consumer-focused regulation in that

space. We hope to hear more about that from the UK Government soon.

As you probably know, for many home owners, a key part of the net zero transition is that there are about 30,000 homes on heat networks at the moment—

**Sarah Boyack:** We will come on to that. I am talking about retrofitting at the moment, which is a different issue.

**Sam Ghibaldan:** Sorry, yes.

**Sarah Boyack:** In terms of the changes to be made, you have made quite a lot of recommendations. There are quite a few Scottish Government-funded organisations out there. Have they started changing their standards and how they operate? Are they thinking of area-based retrofit schemes? What differences have consumers seen already, and what is coming next?

**Sam Ghibaldan:** The honest truth is that it is a work in progress. We published the report in June and we are actively engaged with the Scottish Government heat in buildings division team on a range of consumer issues in that space. For example, we have been talking about the review that the Scottish Government will do over the next couple of years on the Home Energy Scotland system and the support and the grant schemes that Home Energy Scotland gets. We have been clear that the eventual outcome of that needs to be clearly tested with consumers so that it works for them.

11:15

On the other side of that equation, a lot of the accreditation, standards and redress schemes fall within consumer protection, which is a reserved area within the remit of the UK Government. In essence, we need a restructuring and a reform of that sector. That will take time, but it is absolutely a point that we fed into the UK Government generally and also more specifically in relation to the review of Ofgem as the regulator and how regulation in that sector needs to work. We hope that there will be good progress on that.

**Sarah Boyack:** Do you then provide an update in terms of what has happened next? Do you feed back into the Scottish Government and the UK Government about what is actually happening?

**Sam Ghibaldan:** Yes.

**Sarah Boyack:** You have talked about Citizens Advice Scotland and Advice Direct Scotland. I give advice to constituents, but it is a bit of an irony that I was not aware of this work until I read the committee papers today. There is something to consider about how you communicate this to

people who are involved, whether they are MSPs or councillors, so that they can support constituents.

**Sam Ghibaldan:** There is a theme here. The committee members want more information from us and we are happy to provide that. In fact, we would be pleased to. We might have proposed this last year but, in terms of our work programme development for this year, we would be happy to host the committee for an informal session to go through the issues that members are experiencing and think about how we can address them.

On the specific question, we published the investigation report and it got a lot of coverage at the time. It has been the most successful coverage area for us so far. It was included in communications with our quarterly newsletter that went around MSPs and MPs. We will be happy to share more information and, indeed, take any further feedback.

**David Wilson:** I have two additional points, the first of which is about direct advice to consumers and constituents who have concerns and complaints. The immediate advice that they could get on matters is provided by Citizens Advice Scotland and Advice Direct Scotland, which we support financially to undertake that activity. That front-line advice is provided by them and we work closely with them on that.

I want to reiterate what I know that you and others recognise. The conversion of our homes and domestic properties in Scotland is an integral and essential part of the wider transition to net zero and addressing the climate change challenge. It could not be more important, and it will require the active engagement of millions of consumers who have to make decisions based on advice and information, with redress. The clear set of recommendations from our investigation is that the framework within which consumers can make decisions is not good enough yet at either the Scottish level or the UK level. The National Audit Office report about the ECO scheme confirmed that in quite striking and, in fact, jaw-dropping detail.

We have to get this right, which is why we regard it as so important. The immediate focus is on the heat in buildings bill, which could not be more important in this area.

**Sarah Boyack:** We will come on to that. On heat networks, every local authority in Scotland now has a local heat and energy efficiency strategy plan. We will see more new builds, whether they are privately owned by home owners or built to rent. This is a now issue.

I made a declaration of interests earlier about working for SFHA, and the issue also affects the social rented sector. In the past year, a lot of us

have had astronomical heating bills from existing heat networks—networks that look fantastic on paper. We are talking about low-income renters who cannot afford such bills. What is the protection now? The issue is not just about what happens going forward, because this is a now issue—a lot of us have experienced it. Yes, people can go to citizens advice bureaus, but how do you support renters whose bills have gone up? It is not a theoretical issue; it is a now issue.

**Sam Ghibaldan:** We have been concerned about that and we have contacted some of the companies that are involved. We understand that, in essence, this is a hangover from the gas price hike, which has driven bills through the roof. Some organisations delayed passing on the increases as long as they could, but then they did. I cannot remember the percentage of the increases, but one of them was 300 or 400 per cent. It was extraordinary.

There are two or three things to note. Our real concern is not just those people who are affected, but the reputational impact on consumer confidence in heat networks. As you know, the target is to see around 400,000 homes on heat networks by 2030. Only 30,000 are on them at the moment, and people need to be confident that they will not experience such increases. Regulation by Ofgem is coming in January, and I could talk you through some of the recommendations and things that we have been discussing in relation to that. However, in terms of the existing heat networks, the best that I can recommend for existing consumers is that they go to the advice bodies that can try to help them.

We have pressed the Scottish Government on introducing a heat networks efficiency scheme for existing heat networks. A lot of them use what is now relatively old technology that is often not low-carbon technology. A heat networks efficiency scheme such as the one that exists in England and Wales would allow scoping studies and the working out of how to effectively replace and upgrade old technology so that heat networks work more effectively and more efficiently. Of course, heat networks that use low-carbon technology rather than fossil fuel technology will not be as prone to being affected by the variable nature of fossil fuel prices.

We have been pushing the Scottish Government on that, and I know that it is looking at the issue. Such a scheme could be relatively low cost, and it might even be as straightforward as buying into the England and Wales scheme and sharing that in Scotland.

**Sarah Boyack:** You have talked about the different types of power, but, going forward, it could be offshore wind or solar. That is not gas—it is not old carbon. There is something about

confidence, including for those running the schemes, as the situation is not what they expect it to be. It feels like the issue is absolutely centre stage. What results are coming from the work that Consumer Scotland has done?

How do you communicate with us? This is such a now issue. We will have the heat in buildings bill and we have the carbon budgets legislation that was passed a couple of weeks ago. We need to get this right, as the issue is massive for businesses, consumers, owners and renters. It could not be more centre stage.

The issue is partly to do with the comms, but it is also to do with the recommendations. Does the issue come out in your next report? How do you feed back to MSPs, not just in this committee but across Parliament? All MSPs will have a big interest in heat networks soon.

**Sam Ghibaldan:** We have done a lot of research on heat networks, but the primary focus area over the past year or 18 months—apart from setting up the advice and advocacy services—has been the regulatory system that Ofgem has been developing, which is due to come into place in January. We have been heavily involved in responding to the various consultations and talking to Ofgem.

**Sarah Boyack:** Are you happy with what Ofgem will introduce?

**Sam Ghibaldan:** We are happy with some of what it will introduce. We support using for heat networks the vulnerability definition that is used for gas and electricity. We have pressed for the requirement to use priority service registers.

We have recommended that Ofgem ensures that the costs of heat are unbundled from other services. As you mentioned, for renters the costs might often be bundled into rental costs, which does not help transparency or help payment. We have been pressing Ofgem for that in regulation. We recognise that that would be complex to do and could need legislative change, so I do not know whether that will be in place for January, but it certainly needs to happen. We have been pressing for that.

**Sarah Boyack:** That is particularly important for renters who get benefits for their rent, but perhaps not for other services.

**Sam Ghibaldan:** Yes, I completely agree.

We have also recommended a ban on disconnection for non-payment of bills for heat through heat networks, which should be the same as the ban that exists for gas and electricity consumers. As a last resort, suppliers could install a prepayment meter, which is not ideal but is better than disconnection. We have recommended

that and Ofgem is actively looking at that recommendation, so we are hopeful.

We disagree with Ofgem on one thing. It has proposed what is, effectively, a two-tier system: it is looking at less stringent standards for not-for-profit heat networks than for business-operated heat networks. We have opposed that because of consumer protection concerns and because it risks consumer confusion, and this journey needs to be simple. We have been actively engaged on that.

That is a summary. We have published on our website all our consultation responses, which are detailed on this issue. I would be happy to share them or maybe have an offline discussion about them.

**Murdo Fraser:** I would like to ask about two specific consumer issues that are covered either in the work that you have done or potentially in your future work programme.

The first is the question of migration to digital land lines. I noticed that there is an impact assessment review of the work that you have done previously. To contextualise this, it is a huge issue in rural areas, including areas that I represent in Mid Scotland and Fife. I had a horrific case, just a few weeks ago, during storm Amy. An elderly lady fell in her house during a power cut caused by the storm. She did not have phone contact with the outside world, because she lives in an area with no mobile phone connectivity. She was, fortunately, called on by a neighbour, but the neighbour could not make contact with the Ambulance Service and had to drive her car 2 miles down the road to get a mobile signal. She then had to go back and wait completely in the dark, with no contact with the outside world, for the ambulance to turn up some hours later. That shows that the migration is a serious issue.

I am interested in understanding the impact of the work that you did in this area and the practical improvements that there have been, because issues are still arising.

**Sam Ghibaldan:** That case sounds horrendous. I am sorry about that.

The importance of the issue comes out in the research and the analysis we did. Some 62 per cent of people in Scotland who have a land line still use it for calls, and 74 per cent of people over 65 use land lines to make calls, so they are still an integral part of the infrastructure. That is borne out by the point that you made. I suppose that the risks in rural areas are those you have set out, added to the fact that there are poorer-than-average mobile signals and, as you mentioned, more frequent and longer-lasting power cuts.

We made recommendations to telecoms providers, Ofcom and the Governments that there needed to be much greater consumer awareness in order to reduce the risks of the digital switchover. I have to say that we were the prime movers in some of that as well. The UK Government agreed that public awareness of the migration could be improved, a result of which is the fact that the telecoms industry has led a national communications campaign, which is now live, focused on telecare users. That campaign is running as we speak, and certainly in the current period.

The UK Government has also produced guidance for telecoms providers on how to identify the consumers who are most at risk during the migration, and some of the risk factors that are used in that guidance are those that we identified. We think that we have had a significant impact, because the campaign would not have existed unless we had been pressing for it.

We are pleased with that, but we continue to monitor the situation. If cases are still arising that are relevant, we would be grateful to hear about them, so that we can take further action if needed.

11:30

**Murdo Fraser:** My sense is that more work clearly needs to be done. I know that Openreach has a service that will provide people with battery back-up for digital land lines, so that, even in the event of a power cut, they can still use them. However, I am not sure that awareness of that service is particularly high. Certainly, in the case that I referred to, the lady did not have that service, so we need much more proactivity on that.

That was helpful. Let me ask you about another issue. Your forward work programme talks about work on the issue of postal services, in relation to which a lot of change is coming down the track. David, you mentioned earlier the work that you are doing or have done around online markets, and in recent years we have seen an explosion in the number of home delivery companies. I do not know whether your work on postal services also covers home delivery companies or whether that is a separate piece of work that you have done or might be looking at doing.

**David Wilson:** We have done substantial work on post—particularly the changes to the universal service obligation—and we are happy to go into that.

Alongside that, we monitor closely the issues around home deliveries and the parcel market. In August last year, we published a report called “Lost in the Post—the consumer experience of detriment in the parcels market”. That was an

important stepping stone to continuing advocacy in this area. It is about having hard data on how consumers are impacted by problems with parcel deliveries—and it is clear that there are substantial problems. That report was useful in drawing out the problems of lost parcels, delays in parcel delivery and the lack of effective redress and complaints mechanisms. As I say, we are alive to those issues.

The areas in which we continue to seek to advocate include the challenges and problems that rural areas face—which are perhaps at the heart of your question—many of which are significantly worse and more challenging because there is less competition and less availability, so greater concerns are being raised by consumers. However, the concerns are broader, with safe places to leave parcels being a particular challenge—we probably all have personal experience of that. Many people do not have a safe place where they would be comfortable with a parcel being left, but parcels are often left in any case.

We would like to be assured that the delivery companies will be more transparent and provide information on their standards of service in this area, as well as having more effective complaints mechanisms to deal with a situation when it goes wrong, while recognising that, in consumer legislation, the responsibility for the delivery by a business using a delivery company lies with the sender and the seller, not with the deliverer. Going back to the discussion that we had earlier about small businesses, it is about making sure that the parcel delivery companies are more accountable, more transparent and more effective in the work that they do.

**Murdo Fraser:** I could cite lots of cases that have come to me because delivery is not happening, delivery has been made to the wrong address or delivery companies are claiming they have delivered but they have not. Evri seems to be a particularly poor exemplar in that respect. In fact, *The Courier* ran a story about it two weeks ago, with some examples from across Tayside of Evri just not performing.

Going back to the more general theme that I started on, which has been a bit of a theme in this committee, you say that you have done work on that and you are encouraging better practice. I guess that committee members are trying to get to the value of your organisation. What are you actually doing that will make a difference for consumers?

**David Wilson:** I am struck that both of your questions, about land lines and parcel delivery, are on areas that we have worked on. We have been transparent, particularly on the land line issue, in charting where we see the transmission

from what we have done through to decisions and improvements for the consumer. However, I have received a clear message this morning that we can do more both to communicate that to you and to communicate it more broadly to consumers.

I would not want to say that that is an entirely justifiable question and challenge from you in terms of our perhaps justifying our existence. I would not want to do that communication solely to justify our existence. Nevertheless, it is an absolutely core part of our activities as an organisation to set out clearly what we expect of business, of regulators and of Governments—what we have recommended, what we expect them to make changes to and why—and to make sure that we are transparent when we are successful in doing that and when we would like them to go further than they have so far.

I would cite, as an example of that, the postal USO—I have not had the chance to talk too much about that—which is an area where we have engaged actively with Royal Mail and Ofcom on the fairly fundamental changes in how we will all use postal services. At least one fundamental component of it is a fairly stark change: the move to what is called the 2.5 deliveries per week model of alternate days for second-class deliveries. We have made it clear that we are not convinced that that has been fully justified by the process that Ofcom and Royal Mail have been through and that we would like it to be constantly monitored now that Ofcom has approved that model. We have made it clear that that is an area we are not persuaded by and that we will hold them to account as much as we can.

**Murdo Fraser:** Okay. Thank you.

**Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP):** Good morning. My first question is about your relationships with Citizens Advice Scotland, Advice Direct Scotland and Trading Standards Scotland. I would like to explore how local issues on the ground that are raised by consumers in my constituency and other members' constituencies reach those organisations and then reach you as the national body. How do you gather in the issues that are raised with you so that you can make recommendations and help to influence change through the Scottish Government and other stakeholders?

**David Wilson:** Sue Bomphray will take that question initially.

**Sue Bomphray:** We are very conscious that the landscape is quite fragmented. We have chosen not to deliver advice to consumers directly but to fund, with the Scottish Government's help, the bodies that provide such advice. That is mainly Advice Direct Scotland and Citizens Advice Scotland. One issue is how we ensure that the

money that we provide to them is used sensibly, that we have a consistent approach across the landscape and that it provides value for money and not duplication. In the example of heat networks, Advice Direct Scotland provides the tier 1 advice and the extra help unit that is part of CAS provides the tier 2 advice.

Because we fund those bodies, we have regular meetings with them to talk about the issues that they are seeing and what we can help with. In that way, we gather up the big issues and consider whether are the things that we are looking at. We do not want to look at the wrong things that are not impacting consumers. That consideration feeds into our work programme for the following year and it influences the work that we do.

We worked with Trading Standards Scotland as part of our most recent investigation and I imagine that it will be involved in the next one, given its nature. We are trying to bring all the different players across the landscape together around scams to understand what more we can do on that subject and how we can make the activity cohesive so that we do not have lots of organisations duplicating things.

There is an opportunity to look across the landscape. We have a CEO group of all the relevant bodies, which Sam Ghibaldan chairs, and it has been really useful for sharing issues and trying to make sure that we use the available money wisely and that there is no duplication between the different bodies.

**David Wilson:** We take our role as funder of the organisations very seriously and it is important that we ensure that value for money and effectiveness are taken into account. I could not emphasise more strongly that we see our relationship with Citizens Advice Scotland, ADS and Trading Standards Scotland as a two-way partnership. It is not in any sense a top-down funding relationship. Consistently with everything that has been said this morning, we see it as crucial to the achievement of our functions that we have a highly effective advisory function that is provided by partner organisations in Scotland.

As an example, I note that, in the work that we have done on home heating, used cars, scams and other subjects, we have provided a complementary research and investigation function that has been hugely valuable to Trading Standards Scotland and complements its work. It is very much a two-way relationship.

**Sam Ghibaldan:** We have arrangements in place with Trading Standards Scotland, Advice Direct Scotland and CAS whereby they feed to us in an aggregated format the data that they are getting, and we use that in some of the decisions that we take. For example, the prioritisation

process for investigations is very much informed by ADS data, which we use regularly. As I said, the second-highest number of complaints were about used cars.

Another thing that we do involves the consumer protection partnership that operates at the UK level, which is convened by the Department for Business and Trade. We are making sure that the Scottish advice data exists in that format and is used in that context, because a lot of the powers on consumer protection are reserved, so it is important that the Scottish data is fed into UK decisions as well as into the work that we do. The value of that data is really powerful, especially when it is complemented by our research to get behind some of the questions.

**Willie Coffey:** Who do you think that consumers expect to make the changes that they are hoping for? Is it you? Is it bodies such as Trading Standards Scotland? Is it MSPs? When people come to my local office and complain about something, their hope is that something will change, because it merits change. Do they look to you to effect change? David, could consumers look at your report when it comes out next month and say, "That's great—we raised that issue last year and change is afoot"? Is that a reasonable expectation for consumers to have?

**David Wilson:** I do not think that any single organisation can provide that service. Consumers who are looking for advice, support, encouragement and information can go to the tried and trusted services that are available. If they want advocacy or want to raise issues in the political space, they will know where to go. My immediate response is that it is a case of horses for courses.

We take very seriously our role as a statutory advocacy organisation, which is our particular contribution to that. We have an equivalent organisation in Northern Ireland, but England and Wales do not have a statutory consumer advocate. Consumers can look to us to champion consumers in the areas that they are concerned about and to advocate on their behalf, whether on energy, post or other issues. That is where we fit in. I hope that a consumer who is concerned about RTS meters or any of the other things that we have talked about can look at our website, get an understanding of what we do and think, "Here's a public body that's fighting my corner."

11:45

**Willie Coffey:** As you have reported, consumer debt is rising significantly in a range of areas, including local goods and services and energy. Are consumers telling you or anybody else that they need different and better arrangements? If we

consider the Consumer Credit Act 1974, the standard 30-day term to pay a bill has not changed for 50 years. David, are consumers telling you, through your engagement with them, that they need better arrangements to help them to manage the debt that they face?

**David Wilson:** Yes—undoubtedly. Sam Ghibaldan is best placed to comment on that.

**Sam Ghibaldan:** It is true that consumers need much more support. The situation has been made much worse by the energy crisis and the cost of living crisis. We run an energy tracker each spring, just after the winter. In the most recent one, which was published earlier this year, although 60 per cent of consumers said that they were easily managing to afford their energy bills, we saw the alarming figure that 15 per cent were in debt or arrears, and that figure had gone up from 9 per cent in the previous year. That illustrates your point.

We have recommended that Ofgem creates a debt relief scheme, in effect, using money in the industry. I am pleased that it is actively working on that, and we expect to see the first parts of it early next year as part of a broader debt strategy that it will operate in the energy sector.

There are also debt issues in the water sector. Some of that relates to confusion, with people not understanding that they have to pay their water bill separately and they do not get a discount even though it is included in the council tax billing. It is not necessarily clear to people that the reduction that they get on the council tax does not apply to water. There are communication issues in that regard. We are working on that with the Scottish Government, because it is responsible for charging, and with Scottish Water to see how it can be improved.

Your comment on the Consumer Credit Act 1974 is interesting, and that might be something that we should explore.

**Willie Coffey:** You do not control that and we do not control it. We know where it is controlled. Consumers must surely be crying out for that help. Will we see that major issue covered your report when it comes out, even if you only flag it up to try to influence thinking in another place about how society deals with consumer debt and how we can help people to deal with it better?

**David Wilson:** To paint a wider picture on that, I note that we are developing our consumer welfare report, which we expect will be published around September next year. It is one of the statutory requirements in the legislation. That will provide an assessment of the state of the consumer experience, if you like. It will be comprehensive, but we hope that it will be readable and digestible

at the same time, and debt will be at the heart of that.

We have already published reports on consumer detriment, energy and water, which Sam Ghibaldan has covered. Issues of debt are directly affecting consumers, including the risks of building up debt because of affordability issues such as the gas price hikes over the past couple of years and, more generally, the easy availability of debt and the changes in modern versions of hire purchase agreements, and we would like to pick them up in our consumer welfare report.

There is an important issue to do with targeting support on dealing with affordability and debt to the consumers who need it most. At both the Scottish and UK levels, there have been legitimate calls, which we have been part of, to find mechanisms to target support to users of energy and other services. Governments have often found that they do not have a ready mechanism or a route to target the consumers that they ideally want to get support to. We have published a number of reports on energy and developed work on water, and we have tried to recommend operational mechanisms to target those who are in water poverty and energy poverty. We have tried to build up expertise and a modelling capability in that crucial area, and we hope that Governments will pick that up and use it.

There is real concern about water poverty. Over the coming year, Scottish Water, the Water Industry Commission for Scotland and the Scottish Government will be looking at future water prices, and we want to ensure sure that water poverty is taken into account as part of that and alongside it.

**Willie Coffey:** I am pretty sure that the committee will be interested in that and in providing whatever assistance we can provide to influence that agenda, because debt is clearly getting worse. Sam Ghibaldan's figures show that the percentage of households who are in energy debt has increased from 9 per cent to 15 per cent—it has nearly doubled. We need to do something to try to assist. Thanks very much for your answers.

**Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP):** Good morning—it is still morning. My first number of questions are for Mr Wilson, who, as chair of the board, seems to be in the driving seat today. Do you think that Consumer Scotland provides value for Scottish taxpayers' money?

**David Wilson:** Absolutely. The nature of the organisation is such that we are building a new area. The issue of consumer advocacy—

**Kevin Stewart:** Give me an example of where you think that value has been provided for consumers and taxpayers here in Scotland.

**David Wilson:** I think that we have made a difference in a number of the areas that we have already discussed.

**Kevin Stewart:** Give me an example.

**David Wilson:** I will perhaps go back to the issue of land lines that we talked about before. We have been at the heart of influencing the UK Government and UK Government regulators to take into account the Scottish experience—in particular, the circumstances of the north of Scotland—in a way that they would perhaps not otherwise have done. That is one example.

There is also the example of the statutory investigation that we carried out on home heating. Consumers' experience of the UK Government's ECO scheme, where the sorts of things that we have been advocating for were not in place, is that it has led to direct damage. We are trying to influence that.

**Kevin Stewart:** Okay. Let us move on. As chair of the board, are you happy with the productivity of Consumer Scotland?

**David Wilson:** In terms of what we are delivering now as an organisation, delivery of the investigation—

**Kevin Stewart:** The investigation.

**David Wilson:** I think that we have been very—

**Kevin Stewart:** Can I stop you there? You have carried out one investigation—

**David Wilson:** We have.

**Kevin Stewart:** —since the organisation came into existence. You are about to embark on a second investigation. It might be coincidental that that was announced the day before your appearance in front of a parliamentary committee. Does one investigation completed and one about to come represent good productivity?

**David Wilson:** It should be recognised that investigation is one part of the broad range of activities that we do. As I said earlier, we have published 91 reports. We have had extensive engagement with wider public bodies—

**Kevin Stewart:** I am sorry, Mr Wilson, but I have very little time and I want to get to the nub of all this. Ninety-one reports have been published and around 200 recommendations have been made. Can you give me examples of where the recommendations that you have made have made a real difference to Scottish consumers, including my constituents?

**David Wilson:** In the interests of time, I will refer to the two areas that we have already touched on. On land lines, we have set out in our published report, almost line by line, how what we

have said has led to decisions and actions by the appropriate regulatory body and by the Government and how that has made a difference. I would never say that that has been solely because of what we have done. I am not seeking to take that credit, but there is a direct link between what we have said, what we have done, the research evidence that we have provided and the advocacy and the action that have been undertaken, and we have been transparent about that.

**Kevin Stewart:** It would be useful if you could set out in detail to the committee the real differences that you have made in that sphere.

Do you track to see who has listened to the 200 recommendations that you have made and what changes have been made? If so, could the committee see that tracking?

**David Wilson:** We are happy to share what we do in relation to the 200 or so recommendations. I have two things to say about that. The first is that the recommendations are in areas that do not involve a binary yes or no, whereby the Government will accept or not accept what we have suggested. Those are on-going recommendations that it will take time to work through. We are not yet at a stage at which we can say that 92 out of 100 have been accepted or acted upon, but we would like to get to that point. We will be more than happy to share that information with the committee when we get to that stage.

**Kevin Stewart:** I canna understand why you would not be tracking that at this moment in time.

**David Wilson:** No, we are tracking that—I am simply saying that that work is perhaps not complete as far as the impact in individual areas is concerned. For example, the test of the recommendations in our investigation report that we published in June/July will, in large measure, relate to how those recommendations influence the Government's heat in buildings bill, which we discussed earlier. That is some months away.

There is a time gap between recommendations being made and their being accepted, but I am 100 per cent with you on the principle that you have set out of tracking the recommendations.

**Kevin Stewart:** I think that the committee would like to see what tracking you have at the moment on whether the recommendations that you have made have been accepted and have made any real change to Scottish consumers.

As well as receiving a substantial amount of money from the Government, you receive levies from energy, post and water. Could you give us an indication of how much income you have had from levies from energy companies, please?

**David Wilson:** I will perhaps ask Sue Bomphray to give you those details. The precise mechanisms for how that levy support is channelled through to us is probably a long answer in its own right.

**Kevin Stewart:** I am not really interested in that; I am interested in the number first of all, thank you.

**David Wilson:** Sue Bomphray will give you that.

**Sue Bomphray:** In 2024-25, we received £2.4 million in core funding from the Scottish Government, and an additional £950,000 came to us in the autumn budget review for the CAS advocacy grant transferring across to us. In addition, we receive £608,000 for energy, £270,000 for heat networks and £193,000 for post. We receive £320,000 in relation to the big energy-saving campaign, which, as we mentioned earlier, is run by CAS, and £260,000 goes back to Citizens Advice England and Wales for the advocacy work that it still does for Scottish consumers as part of energy. We also receive £392,000 from Scottish Water.

**Kevin Stewart:** Substantial sums of money come in from those levies. Give us an example of where you have made a real difference in relation to postal services. You have already said that you do not like certain things that are on the cards; I do not think that any of likes any of that. Give us an example of where you think that you have made a real difference to consumers in relation to postal services for the £193,000 that you have received by way of levy.

**David Wilson:** We have had substantial engagement with Ofcom and with Royal Mail, which is set out in the various publications, reports and research that we have produced.

I will draw out two areas. We have monitored and sought to influence the revised universal service obligation that Ofcom has now made a decision about. We have welcomed and have worked with Ofcom and Royal Mail on many aspects of that. We recognise and acknowledge that the postal market is radically changing. As I described, we are not yet persuaded on the two-and-a-half-day-a-week model, but we are persuaded on other aspects. The voice that we have given to consumers in Scotland, based on research and engagement with those consumers, was perhaps absent in the past. That is an area in which we have made a difference.

If I can—

12:00

**Kevin Stewart:** Can I stop you there, please, Mr Wilson? My office and the offices of all of us around this table have substantial engagement with the likes of Ofcom, energy companies, postal services, Scottish Water and others. Our

resources as MSPs are marginal. I have the equivalent of three and a half full-time folk working for me who have to do a hell of a lot more than that. You have a huge amount of money coming in in levies to advocate for Scottish consumers, yet it seems very difficult for you to give me an example of any tangible change or tangible difference that you have made to Scottish consumers.

**David Wilson:** When it comes to postal services, as I said, the additional area that we have sought to influence Ofcom and Royal Mail on relates to the fact that, among the overall targets that Royal Mail is held to by Ofcom, there are no regional-based targets for Scotland's islands. We think that that is an obvious gap, and we would like Ofcom to more closely monitor the performance of Royal Mail in the islands and to establish a specific postcode-based target in that area.

A second aspect of the work that we have done in that area has been to seek to persuade Ofcom and Royal Mail to put in place a consumer and customer forum in Scotland so that they can better understand the circumstances of Scottish consumers. I am pleased that they took on board that recommendation, and we will play a part in that regard in future. That is another example of an area that we have sought to influence.

On your point about constituency work—

**Kevin Stewart:** I will stop you again, Mr Wilson. You keep using the word "influence". All of us try to influence various things all the time. In terms of the influence that I have been involved in over the piece, I am always able to give tangible examples of change that I have made for my constituents and am able to show that my influence has made a difference—not always, but a lot of the time.

It is quite frustrating that you have been telling us all the things that we already know about energy companies and parcel delivery companies—talking about the frustrations with them and how you have tried to influence things—but you have been unable to highlight any tangible changes that you have been responsible for. From my perspective, I think any of my constituents who are watching this might ask, "What is the purpose of that organisation? What real difference is it making to my life at this moment in time when I have to deal with cost of living issues, high energy bills, dodgy parcel companies and a postal service that is going to the dogs?"

**David Wilson:** The message that I am clearly hearing from you, which I have already accepted and welcomed, is that you would like to know more about what we do and to know how we can influence matters. If there are mechanisms or ways by which we can share the insights and the research that we are taking to Government, the

regulators and others that could potentially assist you in your constituency and parliamentary work, we would be delighted to take that forward.

For example, we have published a number of specific research publications on the postal service—around the time of the Ofcom decision, we published a briefing note setting out the issues that we have. I would have thought that those publications would be valuable and useful to you and, if we can share that information with you, we would be delighted to do so.

**Kevin Stewart:** Some of that may be valuable, but you are not communicating any of that well. I have read some of the reports and, quite frankly, they tell me nothing new. That is the reality. They will not tell my constituents anything new, either. Further, the number of reports and publications is not that great. We have not seen this year's annual report or the reports that there have been since.

If I were you, as chair of the board, I would have great concerns about productivity, quite frankly. If my office was working at the snail's pace that Consumer Scotland seems to be in terms of publications, I would not be a happy man.

**The Convener:** I have two or three supplementary questions. We do not have the annual report in front of us, but I have quickly jotted down the numbers that we were provided with. Could you clarify your annual income? I see £2.4 million coming from the Scottish Government and the levy bringing in somewhere north of £4.5 million a year. What is the actual figure?

**Sue Bomphray:** For 2024-25, the budget was £5.3 million.

**The Convener:** In the most recent annual report, you said that you spent £444,000 on work by third parties, which includes CAS and Advice Direct Scotland. What was the figure for last year?

**Sue Bomphray:** For last year, it was £1.7 million. In the current year, it is about £2.8 million, because of the transfer of the grants from the Scottish Government to us for CAS and ADS.

**Sam Ghibaldan:** We fund the big energy campaign that we set up in 2022. Last year, we took on responsibility for funding the Citizens Advice Scotland consumer education and advocacy grant line, which costs about £950,000 a year. This year, we have also taken on the Advice Direct Scotland helpline, which costs about £900,000 a year.

**The Convener:** Okay, so you have increased that proportion of your budget.

It strikes me that an awful lot of your answers have relied upon the work that you fund those organisations to do, as well as your investigations.

However, you are still spending a substantial amount of money internally. Critically, of the money that is spent internally, only the money for two full-time equivalent posts is being spent on those investigations. Do you think that that balance of expenditure reflects the focus on outcomes that, overall, this committee is asking you to demonstrate?

**Sam Ghibaldan:** There is a difference between a formal statutory investigation and a lot of the work that we do. I will not go into the investigations but, for example, the water affordability work that we did last year involved quite detailed and extensive economic modelling of water charges and their impact on consumers. We identified that about 10 per cent of people in Scotland are in water poverty, and only about one third of those get discount water through the water charges reduction discount scheme, because of the way in which that scheme operates. We have published and promoted a report on that, and we are now actively working with the Scottish Government and Scottish Water on trying to improve that situation. That involves policy decisions for the Scottish Government, but we are involved in working groups with it on those issues and we hope to see progress in that regard during the next strategic review of charges.

We have had two formal statutory investigations, but we do an awful lot of detailed analysis and other work, including feasibility reports—

**The Convener:** To cut through the subtext, people around this committee table can go to lots of places to get analysis and narration of public policy. However, when we see public money being spent, we want to see action and outcomes. That is our frustration. Particularly given that you stated that one of your top risks is stability, we wanted a clear demonstration of that.

Finally, Mr Wilson, it has been striking through this session that you have been the one providing a lot of the answers. When you have done that, you have used the word "we" an awful lot, in particular regarding quite detailed operational matters such as how the investigations and the research has been conducted and the effect that it has had. It is an important principle of governance that the chair and the board are independent of the body itself, so that they can provide oversight. That is particularly important, given that the public are trusting you to oversee the judicious use of public funds and taxpayers' money.

Given your closeness and proximity to the body, do you believe that you have sufficient independence from the day-to-day operations in your role as chair of the board?

**David Wilson:** I do, certainly. I draw your attention to the strength of the governance that we have in the organisation. We have a strong board. We have strong systems of audit and an audit and risk committee. The board gives on-going challenge to the executive team, and there is regular discussion of strategic issues and certainly operational issues.

I will perhaps draw out one example of that. On the investigation that we touched on earlier, we were clear that that was undertaken by the investigation team and was signed off by the chief executive. That was not an investigation by the board, but the board played a challenge role through that. We have that governance and that separation.

I am more than happy to take the feedback that I should have let my colleagues say more and that we got the balance wrong on that.

**The Convener:** Do you understand that, in terms of presentation, that is an issue for us? If we hear the chair of a board providing answers of a detailed operational nature, at least it is incumbent on us to ask whether there is an appropriate separation. This is not the first time that I have made that observation.

**David Wilson:** I agree with you on incumbency, but the range of challenges that all of you at one point or another have set out are operational challenges—which were rightly put to me, as a chief executive—and are also challenges concerning the nature of the organisation that the board has put in place against the backdrop of the legislation, because we can only do what the legislation lets us, to some extent.

The test of the governance, performance and effectiveness of the organisation will be evident in the performance review that we touched on earlier. We would be delighted to discuss that area with the committee when we get the results of that. We hope that that will give you some reassurance on those issues but, if the performance review challenges us, we would like your views on that.

**The Convener:** Okay. Thank you for your time. With that, I draw the public part of the meeting to a close.

12:12

*Meeting continued in private until 12:28.*



This is the final edition of the *Official Report* of this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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