

# objective 6: information, liaison and market intelligence

We have duties under the Enterprise Act 2002 to obtain, compile and keep under review information relating to our functions and to provide information to the public. We handle a large number of telephone and e-mail enquiries. We coordinate OFT responses to public consultations and, through our National Liaison Strategy, we engage with a broad range of stakeholders on competition and consumer issues.

On an international level, we take part in policy forums and liaise with our counterpart bodies to share best practice and identify issues that may inform our future work.

We analyse the information we receive to help identify markets that may not be working well.

## Performance against our annual plan

<p><b>Objective</b></p> <p>We will provide information to the public, gather information on markets from a variety of external stakeholders (other government departments (OGDs), devolved administrations, major PLCs, trade bodies, consumer organisations, members of the public) and produce market intelligence for the market study teams, enforcement teams, and the board.</p>	
<p><b>Our commitment</b></p>	<p><b>Our performance</b></p>
<p>Provide a source of information to the public and gather intelligence for referral to enforcement divisions and Markets and Policy Initiatives Division.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Enquiries Unit produced over 20 short market reports and dealt with nearly 89,000 enquiries.</li> </ul>
<p>Improve the speed and effectiveness with which we handle public enquiries Further develop relationships with stakeholders via a National Liaison Strategy, by initially taking on board opinion-formers in the business and consumer communities and the devolved administrations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Introduced a new automated call distribution system for the Enquiries Unit.</li> <li>Reviewed and restructured our National Liaison Strategy (NLS). A plan was drawn up for improving the OFT's representation across the UK. It was agreed that an OFT representative in</li> </ul>

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	Scotland would be appointed and the NLS team have increased their contacts in Wales and Northern Ireland.
In conjunction with colleagues in the enforcement divisions, lead a programme to gather and analyse information on international issues of relevance to the OFT.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Established a cross-office working group to identify and discuss current and forthcoming international policy issues.</li></ul>

During 2003-04, the OFT spent £0.34m on achieving this objective.

This money was allocated as follows:

<b>Staff costs</b>	<b>£0.32m</b>
<b>Miscellaneous administration</b>	<b>£0.02m</b>



### **Enquiries Unit**

As the public's main point of contact with the OFT, the Enquiries Unit acts as both a source of information to consumers and an early warning system for the OFT on where markets may be failing.

The Unit handled 66,639 telephone calls, 18,586 e-mails and 3,704 letters in 2003-04.

Following a successful pilot scheme, we installed an automated call distribution (ACD) system to improve call handling and provide better management statistics. By offering a short menu of options, the system ensures that callers are put through more speedily to an appropriate member of our staff. For example, one of the menu's options automatically transfers callers with relevant enquiries to our Consumer Credit Licensing Bureau.

We continued to work with the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) on implementing Consumer Direct, a national advice line for consumers, which is due to go live in four pathfinder regions this summer. We have provided a range of literature which can be customised for Consumer Direct clients, together with advice on strategic matters relating to the new service. We will update our ACD menu system in due course to give callers to the OFT the option of being transferred to Consumer Direct.

The Unit's increasingly detailed analysis of consumer enquiries provided important support to our market study and enforcement teams, both in identifying market problems and gathering evidence for ongoing investigations. By liaising closely with Unit staff, OFT officials were able to request specific information from the public on areas of current concern. A project to integrate the Unit's database with our case management system, providing staff across the OFT with improved access, has also been completed.

### **National Liaison Strategy**

As well as responding to external enquiries and complaints, we expanded our links with key stakeholder groups as part of our National Liaison Strategy.

The strategy seeks to establish permanent points of contact with opinion-formers from the business and consumer communities and the devolved administrations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. This ensures an open door to the OFT for bodies wishing to raise concerns and policy issues, and a valuable source of market intelligence for our market study and enforcement teams.

In early 2004, we conducted a series of round-table discussions to explain the findings of our market study into taxis, and in particular our recommendation that restrictions on the number of licensed taxis be removed. Events were held in Edinburgh, Belfast, Cardiff, Birmingham and London and were well attended.

An OFT seminar was held in London for consumer bodies interested in becoming super-complainants under the Enterprise Act. The event outlined the DTI's designation

process, under which bodies will be authorised to make super-complaints to the OFT. It also explained the OFT's approach to handling super-complaints and the type of information and evidence we would look for in a super-complaint submission.

In January, stakeholder events were staged in London and Edinburgh to foster debate on the OFT's 2004-05 draft annual plan. At the Scottish event a team of OFT directors, including the Executive Director, presented the OFT's strategic agenda to an audience of business leaders and consumer representatives.

To further strengthen our links with Scotland, we announced in January our intention to appoint a Scottish representative. The representative will keep the OFT's Scottish partners, and those affected by our decisions, informed of the OFT's work, and provide our board and officials with greater insight into Scottish markets and national issues.

The liaison team also ran internal seminars to brief OFT staff on the DTI's national consumer advice line, Consumer Direct, and the workings of the new communications regulator, Ofcom.

### Payment systems

We published the terms of reference and membership details of a new task force to look at the governance, operation and pricing of banking payment systems.

The creation of the Payment Systems Task Force, which will be chaired by the OFT, follows the Chancellor's statement in his pre-budget report in November that the OFT would take on an enhanced role in relation to payment systems for a period of four years.

Meeting at least four times a year, the new body brings together industry, retail, consumer and government representatives with an interest in payment systems. Its remit is to identify and, where possible, resolve competition, efficiency and incentive issues, focusing particularly on the network effects of existing payment mechanisms.

A number of sub-groups will be established to take forward the Task Force's work between meetings.

To help establish the Task Force's priorities, we canvassed views, via a questionnaire, on a range of issues raised by the Cruickshank report into UK banking competition and our own market study on payment systems (see page 71).

### International issues

Through our international liaison work, we kept in touch with current approaches to consumer protection and competition enforcement worldwide and provided a UK perspective on policy discussions between jurisdictions.

In addition to bilateral contacts with competition and consumer authorities, we participated in international policy forums such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the International Consumer Protection Enforcement Network (ICPEN) and the International Competition Network.

The OFT's Director of Markets and Policy Initiatives represented the UK on the influential OECD Competition Committee, which provides policy analysis and advice to governments on strengthening competition frameworks.

We continued to play an active role in the work of the International Competition Network, a global forum allowing competition authorities and businesses to share ideas and work towards a common set of principles for competition law enforcement.

As part of our own commitment in this area, we received more than 20 overseas delegations to the OFT during 2003-04. With the help of external funding, OFT staff participated in regional seminars and capacity building workshops in Eastern Europe, South America, South East Asia and Eastern and Southern Africa.

### **OECD Economic Survey**

The OECD's 2004 Economic Survey of the UK included a special section on product market competition, which scrutinised our competition law and enforcement regime. This involved interviews with senior OFT staff and the OFT's participation in the UK delegation as the competition representative at the OECD examination. The review, conducted by the OECD's Economic Development and Review Committee, concluded that competitive pressures in the UK were relatively strong, and that economic and administrative regulations inhibiting competition were among the lowest in the OECD.

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