

objective 7 information, liaison and market intelligence

We gather and analyse information to support the work of our market studies and enforcement teams and identify markets that may not be working well. We handle a large number of telephone and email enquiries from the public and, through our UK Liaison Strategy, 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 other jurisdictions to share best practice and identify issues that may inform our future work.

Performance against our annual plan

<p>Objective</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 studies teams, enforcement teams, and the Board.</p>	
<p>Our commitment</p>	<p>Our performance</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"> • Enquiries Unit dealt with 85,679 enquiries and produced three market intelligence reports.
<p>Further improve the speed and effectiveness with which we handle public enquiries.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through the use of an automated call distribution system, our call handling performance improved during 2004-05.
<p>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"> • Broadened and deepened these relationships through planned meetings and stakeholder events.

<p>In conjunction with colleagues in the enforcement divisions, lead a programme to gather and analyse information on international issues of relevance to the OFT.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participated in a wide range of international forums, including the OECD, UNCTAD, ECA and the International Competition Network.
<p>Continue to develop relationships with regional and devolved administrations, including creating a new post for an OFT representative for Scotland.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Held annual plan consultation meetings in all four UK countries • OFT representative for Scotland appointed in April 2004 • Increased our contacts in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

<p>During 2004-05, the OFT spent £0.42m on achieving this objective.</p>	
<p>This money was allocated as follows:</p>	
<p>Staff costs</p>	<p>£0.42m</p>



Enquiries Unit

The Enquiries Unit is the public's main point of contact with the OFT and a key source of information and intelligence for our market studies and enforcement teams.

The Unit handled 69,011 telephone calls, 16,243 emails and 3,879 letters in 2004-05.

We worked closely with the Department of Trade and Industry's Consumer Direct team, which launched telephone advice centres in four pathfinder regions last summer and is expected to launch an additional four regions in June 2005. Despite the large call demand experienced by the pathfinder centres, and the additional callers attracted, call volumes to the OFT were not appreciably affected.

The Unit supported a number of high-profile OFT campaigns during 2004-05; most notably our Scams Awareness Month in February 2005, during which call volumes rose by 25 per cent.

> ***Scams Awareness Month campaign: page 72***

Government Liaison Unit

The Government Liaison Unit was launched in April 2004 to alert the OFT to relevant consultations and coordinate responses from our various divisions. The Unit provided a dedicated email address and telephone line for consultation enquiries from other government departments. During 2004-05 we dealt with 178 calls and 567 emails, the majority of which were forwarded to an appropriate OFT section or to other regulators.

In addition to its extensive work on Consumer Direct, the Unit collated and analysed feedback from the public consultation on the draft annual plan.

UK Liaison Strategy

We continued to expand and strengthen our links with key stakeholder groups in order to promote OFT activities and gather market intelligence.

Having established points of contact with business and consumer groups and the devolved administrations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, we began a programme of planned meetings to deepen these relationships and promote a regular dialogue on issues of mutual interest.

Under the OFT's Race Equality scheme, we improved liaison with black and minority ethnic (BME) stakeholders during 2004-05. Meetings were held with the Ethnic Minority Business Forum, the Chinese in Britain Forum and the Refugee Council to hear from BME businesses and consumers and to ensure that all sections of the community are involved in the OFT's work.

At an OFT seminar on vulnerable consumers, delegates from consumer bodies, charities and trade associations discussed a range of strategies for identifying and helping those most adversely affected by market failures.

We held stakeholder events around the UK to discuss the OFT's draft annual plan and strategic priorities. Meetings took place in London and Edinburgh and, for the first time, in Cardiff and Belfast.

We appointed an OFT representative for Scotland, Maggie Gibbons-Loveday, to further strengthen our links with stakeholders there. She kept the OFT's Scottish partners, and those affected by our decisions, informed of the OFT's work, and provided our board and officials with greater insight into Scottish markets and issues.

International issues

We participated in international forums to develop best practice approaches to competition and consumer regulation enforcement and provide a UK perspective in policy discussions.

At the second joint gathering of the OECD Competition and Consumer Committees, the OFT led a debate on identifying and tackling dysfunctional markets. In his presentation to the meeting, the OFT Chairman used the example of the reform of legal services in the UK to demonstrate how competition policy and consumer protection are inextricably linked (for more information, see page 53).

The OECD Competition Committee published an update of a review of the UK's competition regime conducted by the OECD's Economic Development and Review Committee (EDRC) in 2003. The report was based on the Competition Committee's own comparison of experiences in 10 OECD member countries.

It confirmed the EDRC's finding that competitive pressures in the UK were relatively strong, and that economic and administrative regulations inhibiting competition were among the lowest in the OECD. During the reporting period, we prepared to host the annual meeting of the European Competition Authorities (ECA). Heads of competition authorities from the EEA and EFTA member states, together with representatives of DG Competition and the EFTA Surveillance Authority, convened in London in April 2005 to discuss progress on work streams such as air traffic and payment systems.

Preparations also began for the UK's Presidency of the European Union, which will include a one-day conference, organised by the OFT, for competition and consumer protection authorities and officials from EU member states. The event will also be attended by representatives from national and European business and consumer groups. It will build on the traditional Presidency Competition Day by reflecting the OFT's combined competition and consumer functions. The OFT is the first authority to plan such a joint event and invite such a wide audience of stakeholders.

We continued to play an active role in the International Competition Network (ICN), a global network of competition authorities set up to promote consistency in competition enforcement. Within the Mergers Analytical Framework sub-group, co-chaired by the OFT Chairman and the Irish Competition Authority, we produced a Merger Guidelines Checklist to provide ICN members with a practical and concise reference manual for the assessment of mergers.

To provide technical assistance to other competition authorities, around 30 study visits to the OFT were organised in 2004-05. Through external funding, OFT staff also took part in capacity-building events to help new EU member states develop their market study and competition enforcement frameworks.

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