

## SWEDEN

### Annual Report on Consumer Policy Developments 2001

#### **Consumer Affairs and the Swedish Presidency**

Sweden assumed the presidency of the European Union during the first half of 2001 and consumer affairs was among the important highlights areas in the Swedish programme. In order to set focus on consumer protection an informal meeting was arranged between the EU's internal market and consumer ministers for the first time in the history of the EU. The meeting was held in Lund in the south of Sweden and focused on strengthening the position of consumers in the internal market. Among the three themes that came up for discussion were good market behaviour (including codes of conduct), administrative co-operation and increased confidence in products and services.

In connection to the informal meeting in Lund a seminar was held for European consumer organisations – Voice of the European Consumer 2001. A representative from this seminar was invited to present the joint view of the organisations to the ministers at the informal meeting.

#### ***Action Plan for consumer policy***

On the 13 June 2001 the Swedish Government adopted a Consumer Policy Bill. In the bill the Government proposes five new objectives for consumer policy – the influence objective, the household economy objective, the safety objective, the environmental objective and the knowledge objective. These objectives are to dictate both the courses of national consumer policy work and Sweden's efforts vis-à-vis the EU and other international fora. The Government also proposes that time-bound targets should be set up to further steer the direction of consumer policy work. In addition, new goals have been established for the Swedish Consumer Agency.

The bill represents an action plan for consumer policy. In the bill, the Government lays down the applicable targets for activities over the next five years and also stipulates a number of measures that have been deemed suitable to implement during the same period.

Consumer aspects should be taken into account when the Government is drafting other policies and planning its activities. To facilitate this, an advisory committee on Consumer Affairs should be established within the Government Offices, on which representatives of those authorities and organisations that are most closely associated with consumer issues would be invited to participate.

The following targets will apply for the period 2001-2005:

- Guidance, information and education for consumers are to be enhanced.
- Non-governmental organisations should be allowed to exert greater influence on consumer policy.
- Consumers are to be given a stronger position on the financial markets.
- Efforts in the field of product safety and market surveillance, especially when it comes to child safety, are to be intensified.
- More support is to be given to consumer research.
- Consumers are to be provided with better information about prices.
- Consumers are to be given better conditions to act on markets that have recently been opened up to free competition.
- Eco-labelling and ethical labelling are to become more widespread.

### ***Review of the Travel Guarantees Act***

In the annual report for 1999 information was brought on a review on the Travel Guarantees Act. The report proposed the replacement of the existing Act by a new Travel Guarantees Act. In accordance with the terms of reference for the Committee the proposals aim at the maintenance and, where necessary, the improvement of the existing guarantee system in order to make it easy to manage, competitively neutral and consistent with a high level of consumer protection as enshrined, *inter alia*, in the EC Package Travel Directive. The main elements of the present Act is suggested to be maintained while the scope of the law is to be broadened to some extent. The review is still under preparation and a Government bill will be presented to Parliament during the first half of 2002.

### ***Review of supervision of estate agents***

Another item presented in the annual report for 1999. Information was brought on the review of the supervision of estate agents. The report stated, *inter alia*, that the supervision by the Estate Agents Board should be broadened and that the Board should be given the mandate, after consultation with the professional organisations, to launch guidelines as regards codes of conduct and similar in this area. The review is still under preparation.

### ***The right to plead before court***

A new possibility for consumers to plead before court has been implemented into Swedish legislation. The new Act has been implemented according to a directive on injunctions for the protection of consumer's interests. The purpose of the regulation is to enforce the protection for consumers in the European Union at cross-border infringements on consumer directives. Approved authorities (consumer organisation) will be empowered to plea cases in the member state where the infringement has occurred. The Act was implemented in May 2001.

### ***Cross-border complaints and dispute resolution schemes***

In March 2001 a Euroguichet (Consumer Europe) was opened in Stockholm where consumers can get information and advice when having specific consumer query regarding cross border shopping. Local consumers who have experienced problems as a result of cross border shopping can also get help there as well as other European citizens who have complaints about goods or services ordered from a Swedish company or purchased while traveling in Sweden.

In October 2001 the pilot phase of the European Extra-Judicial Network (EEJ-Net) was launched in Sweden and most of the other member states within the European Union as well as Norway and Iceland. The objective for the EEJ-Net is to help consumers settle their disputes out of court and make it easier for them to seek redress in conflicts with suppliers from another country in the EEA-area. Central contact points, or "clearing houses", has been set up in each country where consumers can get advice and help in accessing existing out-of-court alternative dispute resolution (ADR) schemes. The Swedish Euroguichet is appointed clearinghouse. The cross-border out-of-court complaints network for financial services, FIN-Net, complements the EEJ-Net. FIN-NET was launched in February 2001 and the Euroguichet (Consumer Europe) in co-operation with the Swedish Consumer Complaints Board carries out the duties.

### ***Consumer Research***

A Center for Consumer Science started their work during spring 2001 but was not launched until the 30 January 2002. CFK is an interdisciplinary consumer research center in collaboration with the University of Gothenburg and Chalmers University of Technology. Their main purpose is to initiate and co-ordinate interdisciplinary research, serve as a forum for consumer researchers nationally as well as internationally and to initiate a dialogue between researchers, consumer organizations, companies, and authorities interested in understanding consumers.

### **Responsibility on financial advice**

The business of banks and other financial companies has changed in different ways. The focus has moved from traditional lending services towards different instruments of financial services such as securities, bonds and shares. This change is of course also a result of an increased interest from the public in financial instruments. In order to clarify the responsibilities for this new role for banking personnel to become financial advisers the Government has appointed an investigation. The aim for the investigation is to map the protection for consumers concerning the responsibility for financial advisers and, if necessary, suggest legislation in this area.

### **Environmental communication**

In a communication in December the Government put down the ongoing work and the goals to be reached concerning consumer policy in the environmental area. Sustainable consumption and eco labelling are two important areas in the communication to be dealt with in the future.