

CONSUMERS

Matters to consider in completing the Integrated Impact Assessment

Probably the most important concept here is that everyone is a potential consumer. For the purposes of the policy or project, everybody who is affected may be a consumer, even if there is no transaction as such involved. A reform to (say) local government structures may at first sight have no obvious consumer impact: but if one of the purposes of the reform is to enable services to be delivered more effectively to the public, then the public receiving these services are the consumers, and the impact on them should be assessed.

When assessing the impact of a policy on consumers, you should consider the proportion of consumers that will be affected, and their particular needs. Different groups of consumers include:

- Relatively affluent and well informed consumers
- Technology literate/illiterate consumers
- Vulnerable consumers – including the elderly, the poor, those with literacy problems.

Having established the types of consumer who might be affected by the policy, you should think widely about the different ways in which the policy might impact on them. There is no definitive list of consumer impacts, but essentially we are looking at whether the policy forces (or encourages) consumers to change their habits and whether they bear the cost of doing so. Elements to consider include:

- the price of a good or service (or a change in the price)
- the availability of a good or service (or a change in the availability)
- the labelling of a good or service (for example, its clarity and how easy it is to understand, especially for those with literacy difficulties)

For all policies that affect consumers, consideration should be given to:

- the length of the transition period for any changes (taking particular account of the needs of the poorest, especially where the change requires them to purchase new equipment)
- the information that will be provided to help consumers - should be clear, timely and properly targeted.

The [General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland](#) has a specific remit to champion the cause of consumers in Northern Ireland and has undertaken a range of research on how consumers, particularly more vulnerable consumers, are affected both by practices of businesses and by public policy and service provision. Its work focuses particularly on food, energy, transport and consumer education. Details of much of this work are published on the GCC's website. Consideration should be given to the sections entitled 'Consumer Principles' and the 'Criteria for Guiding Decisions on Priorities' contained in Appendix 1 of the GCC's [Corporate Plan 2002-05](#).

Quantification

In practice it is extremely difficult to quantify the impacts of a policy on consumers, other than in regards to the price of a good or service, and in some cases the level of

availability of a good or service. A brief qualitative description of the expected impact will often be sufficient for the purposes of the assessment.