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### WHAT'S NEW ON THE CONSUMER FRONT IN EUROPE?

The Consumers' Consultative Committee attached to the European Commission is taking stock of developments of interest to consumers in Community countries during the first half of 1976.

The seven reports received - contributions for Belgium and Italy have yet to reach us - are reproduced this week in slightly edited form. Readers will appreciate that the views expressed are those of the authors.

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DENMARK

(Compiled by Mrs B. Federspiel of the Forbrugerråd)

I. Safety

New law to ban dangerous products

On 15 June the Forbrugerråd (the Danish Consumers' Council) called on the Minister for Commerce to table a bill at the earliest possible date to protect consumers against products which represent a danger to health and safety.

There is a need for legislation which would allow immediate, concrete action to be taken against a given product. Some problems call for prompt action and cannot await the adoption of general rules.

The Consumers' Council has also called on the Minister for Commerce to look into the administrative problems associated with the regulation and control of production to prevent the manufacture and marketing of products which are unsafe or dangerous.

It feels that a consumer product safety commission should be set up to ensure that consumers' interests are protected. One of its main functions would be to look after consumer interests at the product development stage. This could be done, for example, by making consumers' wishes as regards specifications and product development known to manufacturers or trade organizations.

In the United States the Consumer Product Safety Commission operates a system of this kind.

Dangerous coffee filters

In June 1976 the Consumers' Council approached the consumers' ombudsman to secure immediate withdrawal from the market of coffee filters which topple over easily.

At least 700 people are scalded every year in Denmark by overturning coffee filters. The main victims are women and small children who require long, painful treatment for burns on the face and body.

Consumers' Council opposed to nuclear power stations

The Consumers' Council considers that it would be irresponsible to "go nuclear" at present: there are too many question marks, too many unsolved problems.

At its 15 June meeting the Consumers' Council decided to make further representations to the Government and Parliament's energy policy committee. It fears that Parliament may take a hasty decision on one of the most important issues consumers have ever had to face.

Postponement of a decision in principle on the construction of nuclear power stations in Denmark will at least mean that the most serious problem - storage of radioactive waste - can be examined in greater detail, that alternative plans can be drawn up to replace the plan presented by the Ministry for Commerce and that research into the exploitation of sources of energy that do not harm the environment can be intensified.

The chairman of the Consumers' Council, Mrs Dorte Bennedsen, is a member of Parliament and represents consumers on the Energy Council set up by the Minister for Commerce. The Council is to help the Minister with planning and research in the energy sector.

## II. Services

### New law inadequate

The new hours of trading law came into force on 1 July 1976. It allows retailers to open from 0600 to 1730 hours Monday to Friday and from 0600 to 1200 hours on Saturday. They can also open for an additional six hours a week spread over no more than three days, Saturday afternoons, Sundays and public holidays being excluded.

The Consumers' Council is unanimous in regarding this as totally inadequate. It would have preferred to see the hours of trading law repealed for social and administrative reasons. The old law allowed shops to open for 68 hours, the new law for 69½ hours a week!

The range of goods on offer in a large number of shops was reduced when the law took effect. Kiosks, bakers, open sandwich bars and the like are now confined to selling goods specified by the Ministry of Commerce. This has created problems for consumers who, under the old law, could buy a glass of beer or a cup of coffee from a kiosk after the shops closed. It also means that hundreds of people employed in this type of establishment are out of a job or have lost their secondary source of income.

### Private users receive their post later

In January the Consumers' Council protested to the directorate-general about a decision that commercial users would receive their post not later than 1000 hours while private users would have to wait until 1300 hours.

Several users spontaneously rang the Consumers' Council to complain of the reduced service offered by the post office asking the Consumers' Council to intervene. Users in rural areas said that for them it would be an improvement to receive their post by 1300 hours; the normal time was 1600 hours!

### Spares monopoly

Spares, especially car spares, are a recurrent source of complaints to the Consumers' Council and its magazine Taenk. Large numbers of consumers claim that there is in fact a monopoly.

In April 1976 the Consumers' Council asked the Monopolies Commission to say whether the price charged for a given Volvo spare part was fair or not. It asked the Monopolies Commission to take action on all Volvo spare parts if it found the price to be excessive.

## III. Miscellaneous

### Cooperation with pharmacists

The Danish Pharmacists Association has urged the Consumers' Council to collaborate with it in organizing an exchange of information in areas of common interest.

The Consumers' Council recognizes that many problems involving pharmaceutical products remain unresolved and has therefore proposed a meeting.

The areas the Consumers' Council would like to see covered include labelling (including dating) and the number of pharmacists and non-prescription pharmacies.

School photographs

The consumers' ombudsman has referred proposals to regulate school photographs to the Consumers' Council. The main feature of his proposal is that photographs would be sent to parents for examination only if they make a specific request, e.g. by completing a special form.

The Consumers' Council feels that although the proposal would represent an improvement on the present situation it would not solve the problem of ensuring that parents and pupils have a say in the matter; in Sweden, for example, the parents' association and the pupils' committee are involved in the decision. The Consumers' Council also deplores the fact that the proposal does not ban the sale by pupils and teachers of photographs taken by professional photographers.

The "weekly offer" bait

The Consumers' Council told the consumers' ombudsman this spring that weekly offers and discounts are often used to lure consumers into shops where they can be sold other goods at the same time. He had asked for its opinion on the practice of advertising special offers available to consumers who can produce a copy of the advertisement.

The Consumers' Council stresses that the practice does not relate to items "reduced for clearance" but to systematically planned discounts on current stocks. Special offers of this kind make price formation obscure and hinder price comparisons.

The Consumers' Council considers that linking a special offer to presentation of the advertisement is incompatible with good marketing practice: it is completely arbitrary in that consumers who cannot produce the advertisement are placed at a disadvantage. Finally, it pointed out that widespread use of this practice could distort competition between magazines and newspapers.

IV. Consumer tribunal under pressure

The consumer tribunal set up on 1 June 1975 is kept extremely busy. Between 1 January and 1 May 1976 it was notified of approximately 1 500 cases; 277 consumers complained about textiles and shoes, 276 about furniture and furnishing fabrics and 131 about door-to-door sales of books; 131 consumers were dissatisfied with domestic appliances and items such as sewing machines, mini-radios and lawn-mowers; 85 consumers complained about photographic equipment, clocks, watches and optical equipment.

During the same period the tribunal's secretariat completed work on 507 written complaints. In 160 cases a settlement was reached between the parties through the agency of the secretariat; 34 cases were withdrawn and the remainder were rejected following examination by the secretariat. Of these 72 were rejected because the plaintiffs did not turn up when asked to do so by the tribunal; in 56 cases the secretariat felt that the plaintiff could not win; in 70 cases the secretariat estimated that the matter could not be handled by the tribunal, because of need to produce witnesses for example; 66 cases were regarded as being outside the tribunal's competence and in 49 cases the secretariat referred the plaintiff to an appeal court recognized by the tribunal.

FRANCE

(Compiled by Mr E. Dary of COFACE)

I. Institutions

A Consumer Affairs Secretariat attached to the Minister for Economic and Financial Affairs was created by decree of 12 January 1976. Its function is to coordinate administrative action in this area, leaving freedom of action to the bodies and organizations concerned.

A member of the Secretariat acts as chairman of the Comité National de la Consommation (national consumer council), a consultative body attached to the Ministry, which should now carry more weight. It was one of the committees which worked with the Commission de Développement (Development Commission) on the preparation of the Seventh Economic and Social Development Plan, which covers the period 1976-80. Its contribution took the form of a report submitted on 26 March 1976.

The General Report on the Seventh Plan, submitted to Parliament on 21 April, contains 25 priority action programmes; one of them (No 18) is designed "to strengthen the role of the consumer". The preamble reads as follows:

"If they are to buy more rationally, consumers must have more independence. They could then become partners in a dialogue with producers and distributors which would improve the quality of consumption, help to reduce waste and improve the play of competition."

The Consumer Affairs Secretariat presented a proposal for a consumer policy to the Government on 26 May. The proposal sets out to ensure more effective consumer protection; to encourage action by consumers; to promote a more constructive dialogue between all economic partners; and to improve administrative coordination.

The paper is of considerable interest in that it can be viewed as a declaration of intent on the priority action programme. Although the conclusions of the consumer group were not expressly taken over by the Government in the Seventh Plan, consumer organizations and the Institut National de la Consommation (INC) are basing their work programmes on them.

The Ministerial proposals are largely based on the report by the Comité de la Consommation. However, implementation of the proposals (for instance, the settlement of small claims) has not been discussed with either the consumer organizations or the INC which are now considering how they should react to the Plan and the proposals.

Meanwhile, the French socialist party has published a Plan for Consumer Affairs which discusses an outline law produced by consumer organizations in April 1975.

A joint consultative committee on unfair clauses in contracts was set up in May 1976; it is basing its work on the list drawn up by Council of Europe experts. Recommendations may be forthcoming by December 1976.

A similar committee was set up in June 1976 to deal with insurance.

II. Legislation

A law on nicotine poisoning was adopted at the May/July session of Parliament.

The draft laws tabled include one on consumer credit and another on economic cooperation and the suppression of illegal agreements and anti-competitive behaviour. These draft laws may be debated during the Autumn session.

### III. Trading practices

The Carrefour supermarket chain sparked off a controversy when it offered non-branded products (known as "produits libres") for sale. Consumer organizations, producers and Carrefour's competitors all reacted differently.

The Ministry of Agriculture launched an "Opération Vérité" on food labelling: during the campaign its inspectors made frequent checks to ensure that food which should be labelled was.

### IV. Information and advertising

A decree to regulate the advertising of articles, appliances and methods presented as beneficial to health was adopted in January 1976.

A Commission set up in February will use audio-visual methods to educate and defend consumers.

The terms of the licence and agreement of the national television and radio companies were published in March; they include various articles relating to consumer news.

In May/June the Darty supermarket chain offered consumer organizations and the INC one-third of its advertising space in seven newspapers to express their views freely. As in the Carrefour case, the offer provoked violent objections from competitors. Consumer organizations felt that they should not let themselves be used by Darty but their reactions varied; some refused the offer out of hand while others used the advertising space to reject the offer publicly.

Consumer organizations, the advertising industry and producers are in fact engaged in a running battle. Consumer organizations have called for a review of the television advertising code: they are campaigning in particular for a ban on children in television advertising. Consumer representatives on the Bureau de Vérification de la Publicité (advertising standards office) have succeeded in getting the board to apply stricter rules to press advertising.

## GERMANY

(Compiled by the Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Verbraucher)

### I. Agricultural and food policy

- In its 1975 annual report the Deutsche Bundesbank states that current agricultural policy is not likely to encourage stability and pinpoints many instances where there has been an above-average increase in producer prices in agriculture. The report states that the price level for vegetable products at the end of 1975 was one-third higher than at the end of 1974; on average, prices for all farm products were 13.5% up on 1974.
- The Bundesverband des Deutschen Gross- und Aussenhandels (federal association of wholesalers and exporters) recently calculated that agricultural policy was currently costing Germany DM 32 600 million a year. The taxpayer provided DM 12 000 million, the consumer DM 20 600 million. The taxpayer's burden is chiefly made up of tax rebates (1 300 million), EAGGF subsidies (3 300 million), subsidies from the budget of the Federal Ministry of Agriculture (5 300 million), and agricultural expenditure by the Länder (1 300 million).

- The higher guaranteed price for milk has had the effect of simultaneously boosting production and curbing consumption in most EEC countries. The butter and milk powder mountains represent only about half the actual surplus which must be subsidized because no buyer can be found at current market prices. The 1976 EEC budget includes approximately DM 7 000 million for milk subsidies (DM 5 500 million in 1975). The current German share uses up the income tax paid by about 700 000 workers. In view of these huge costs there is an urgent need for the early introduction of an effective method of making producers shoulder part of the burden of financing these surpluses.
- Rationalization of the agricultural policy to make it more efficient and less expensive is the subject of a study by two agricultural experts from Göttingen (Professor Koester and Professor Tangermann) for the Ministry of Agriculture in Bonn.

The nub of the proposals for reform, which are not confined to Germany but rather aimed at European Community as a whole, is that the guaranteed prices should be kept 2 to 2.5% a year below the general inflation rate and then gradually aligned on "corrected" world market prices. Any loss in income would be offset by direct income transfers. This would make it possible to make more allowance for social differences within agriculture, to curb the rise in food prices, promote rationalization of agricultural structures, relieve the consumer and taxpayer of an enormous financial burden and raise real national income without reducing farm incomes. Publication of the 300-page study has excited considerable comment.

- According to the Government's third food report half the population is overweight and one-third dangerously so; 12 million people regularly eat away from home. The report calls for improved labelling of food products to show nutritional value and in particular for the compulsory indication of the fat content of charcuterie. As with milk products, the consumer should be given the information he needs to eat a balanced diet; for instance he should be told the meat, fat and water content of the various kinds of charcuterie which are eaten every day in most German households.

## II. Consumer protection laws

- The reformed drugs legislation represents a considerable advance as regards the quality, therapeutic value and safety of drugs used to treat men and animals. It makes provision for alignment on international standards by means of an amended authorization procedure. The old registration procedure is now limited to homoeopathic medicines with no proven effect.

Further improvements affect advertising, compulsory information in package leaflets and manufacturers' liability. For manufacturers the ceiling on damages is fixed at a single payment of DM 200 million or annuities amounting to DM 12 million; for an individual victim maximum damages are a lump sum of DM 500 000 or an annuity of DM 30 000; where there are more than 400 victims this compensation is proportionally reduced.

- The law governing terms and conditions of sale represents a milestone on the road to greater consumer protection. From now on hundreds of contracts will be based on the principle of a fair balance between the interests of the parties and a large number of clauses which were to the consumer's disadvantage will disappear.

The substantive provisions are supplemented by procedural rules under which actions can be brought by trade and consumer associations. It must be added here however that the risk of having to pay costs in actions involving less than DM 500 000 will tend to curb the activities of consumer associations.

Appeals and rulings are to be registered at the Federal Cartels Office. The law, which comes into force on 1 April 1977, does not apply to services provided by the public authorities.



- The law on waste-water taxes is designed to encourage enterprises discharging waste water to take preventive measures (extend sewage treatment plants, improve waste water purification techniques, change production methods ...) and ensure a more equitable distribution of costs resulting from water pollution. The taxes will be charged from 1981; they will begin at DM 12 per unit of pollution and increase to DM 40 by 1986. In contrast to existing rules on waste water this method provides a financial incentive which can be intensified where necessary.
- The law on technical aids (also known as the machine safety law) came into force eight years ago. It covers such major consumer categories as household appliances, do-it-yourself tools and toys. Under the law manufacturers or importers may put such aids on the market only if they comply with the relevant rules (viz. safety at work and accident prevention rules and generally recognized technical standards) and are so constructed as to present no danger to the life and safety of users and bystanders when properly used.

So far this law has been invoked to ban more than 700 items. One major loophole, however, is the fact that businesses which do not import goods directly cannot be prosecuted. Another shortcoming is that there is no provision for informing the public of dangerous goods already on the market.

The number of swimming accidents resulting from the use of air mattresses has prompted North Rhine-Westphalia's Labour and Health Ministry to ban the sale of certain types of mattress. This meant that an entire product range was banned, rather than one manufacturer's product. Although the decision could be interpreted as a move to direct consumption it should be welcomed in the general interest.

- The number of checks carried out by the weights and measures authorities on pre-packaged products almost doubled between 1974 and 1975; indeed checks have increased fivefold since early 1972. The largest increase was for artisan undertakings producing bread and pastry products and for fruit, vegetables and fruit and vegetable products. It has been calculated that in all 2 400 000 packages were checked.

For food products other than pastry products the number of recorded breaches of the regulation requiring that the median value be adhered to has dropped from 13.1 to 9.4 and then 7.9% since 1973; for non-food products the figures are 17.7, 13 and 9.7%. This improvement is obviously linked to the increase in the number of controls and the associated publicity campaign. Most of the temporary increase in the number of breaches of the lower (6%) and absolute (6.5%) tolerances can be ascribed to the tightening of margins since the beginning of 1975; industry had still to adapt to these new levels.

### III. Miscellaneous

- Commenting on the consumer protection role of the trade unions Mrs Schneider-Zugowski, head of the DGB's Competition and Consumer Policies Service recently stated that in their efforts to improve the living conditions of workers the trade unions represented their members' interests vis-à-vis employers not only at the stage where income is earned but also at the stage where it is spent. Consumer policy was therefore an extension of wages policy and ensured that wage increases which have been fought for are not wiped out by artificially high prices, poor quality or doubtful marketing strategy. The trade unions support the objectives of the consumer organizations, only ways and means differ.

Evidence of trade union involvement is provided by the fact that trade union representatives sit on the Consumers' Council, the Consumer Committee, Stiftung Warentest (the German equivalent of Which?) and RAL; at Land level trade union officials work in consumer centres and often sit on the governing body. In Bavaria, for instance, the trade unions organize a number of seminars on consumer policy each year with financial backing from the Land Economics Ministry. Another example is North Rhine-Westphalia where the DGB district offices are active on the councils of the Land's 20 consumer advice bureaux.

A consumer law handbook produced by AgV and the DGB is to be published shortly by Luchterhand, Neuwied. The 930-page loose-leaf volume costs DM 98 and is chiefly aimed at people actively engaged in consumer work as counsellors and education officers.

- On 2 June 1976, whilst on an official visit to Germany, Mr Henri Canonge, Chairman of the European Communities' Economic and Social Committee, spoke to the AgV in Bonn on the subject of strengthening the position of consumers and their representatives at national and European level so that Europe's economic and social problems might be ironed out.

In reply Professor Blume, Chairman of the AgV, stressed that German consumer organizations were completely prepared to cooperate with the European institutions. One proof of this was that three German members of the Economic and Social Committee represented consumers. But he felt that consumers had little opportunity of making their opinions known at Commission and Council level.

## IRELAND

(Compiled by Mr J. McMahon, a member of the Consumers' Consultative Committee)

### I. Institutions

The National Economic and Social Council is a nationally representative Council currently working to produce an economic and social plan. It recently issued a comprehensive report on housing and its financing. One highlight: it suggested that the conventional 20/25 year building society loan repayable by fixed equal monthly repayments be replaced by a loan with a longer repayment period and graduated repayments which would start low and rise over the life of the loan to reflect rising salary levels of borrowers over their lifetime.

The National Consumer Advisory Council, established in 1973 by the Minister for Industry and Commerce, consists of people drawn from industry and business federations, a farmers' organization, the trade unions (these are nominated by the Minister), and consumer groups. All participate in a personal capacity, not as representatives of their organizations. Its primary function is to advise the Minister on important matters relating to consumers. It published a report in December 1974 and the first piece of legislation implementing changes recommended by it is about to be introduced in the legislature.

The National Prices Commission, established in 1971, reports monthly to the Minister for Industry and Commerce on pricing matters. It also publishes occasional papers dealing chiefly with consumer matters and the performance of individual industries.

Its latest occasional paper (No 20) dealt with the bakery and flour confectionery industry and suggested a pricing model for assessing future price increases. It found wide variations in standards of efficiency. It also noted that "bread weight" laws were not fully enforced.

To streamline the Commission's workload the Minister introduced the "Prices and Charges (Notification of Increases) Order 1976" which broadly aims at controlling prices in dominant firms in each industry. In the past the Commission had to assess applications for price increases from each individual firm.

Price Line is a public prices complaints phone service operated by 45 inspectors in Dublin and 6 other major cities in Ireland. Since its introduction in June 1974 it has handled 21 590 calls - 10 963 complaints and 10 627 enquiries.

An average of 64% to 65% of the complaints are substantiated. Legal proceedings are regularly undertaken to enforce price control orders. Price Line inspectors take the recommended retail price as a basis and consumers obtain refunds.

The Post Office Users Council has been in existence for almost two years. Its first report is due shortly.

## II. Legislation

The first Consumer Protection Bill will be introduced in the Dáil (Parliament) in the very near future. It deals with trade descriptions and advertising and contains provisions to ensure that irresponsible or reckless claims about services are outlawed and that reduced price offers are genuine. The full text will be available later.

## III. Industrial products

The Institute for Industrial Research and Standards has had a Consumer Complaints Section for some years. The section is currently handling 1 000 complaints a year.

## IV. Agriculture

There is some concern in agricultural circles about consumer prices for farm products. This centres to a large extent on what happens between the farmer's gate and consumer's table. Prices go up but often quality goes down. This is particularly true of fruit and vegetables.

Some economists are concerned about the behaviour of Irish farmers. They feel that they are pursuing shortsighted advantages under the common agricultural policy while ignoring the problems of quality, surpluses, and inefficient marketing in Ireland and the Community.

## V. Voluntary organization

The Consumers' Association of Ireland has organized a number of meetings of groups interested in the betterment of consumers in Ireland. As a result a draft memorandum has been prepared on consumer information and education in Ireland. When all parties agree this document, it will be submitted to the Government for assistance with its implementation.

During the first half of 1976 the Irish Housewives' Association concentrated on a recycling project. A public meeting was held in Dublin's Mansion House and, with the cooperation of Dublin Corporation and national dairy firms, recycling of glass has improved.

LUXEMBOURG

(Compiled by Mr R. Meis of Luxembourg's CGT)

I. Information

The Union Luxembourgeoise des Consommateurs (Luxembourg's Consumers' Union) continued its efforts to keep consumers informed. It had an information stand at Luxembourg's International Fair, arranged for talks on Radio-Télé-Luxembourg, distributed documents explaining the progressive winding-up of IOS funds, and so on.

II. Education

The ULC produced a brochure entitled "Bewusst Einkaufen - Verbraucherfiber für den Primärschulunterricht", which was published by the Ministry of Education, and its president gave lectures on consumer protection at the Ecole Supérieure du Travail.

III. Protection

A "litigants' committee" has been set up within the ULC to inform the general public on the operation of legal services. It deals with complaints from ULC members concerning the administration of justice, the organization of the legal system, agents of the legal system (lawyers, baliffs ...), gaps in legislation and so on. It can produce proposed amendments to existing legislation, make suggestions for new legislation and, if so requested, give its views on draft laws.

Mr Mart, Minister of Economic Affairs, visited ULC headquarters to discuss the major problems involved in improving consumer protection.

IV. Legislation

A Grand-Ducal Decree on honey was published on 21 May 1976 (Mémorial No 25).

A ministerial Decree on the designation of proprietary medicinal products and the like was published on 31 March 1976 (Mémorial No 14).

The ULC has drafted proposals to amend the rented property law of 14 February 1955 to make it fairer to tenants.

NETHERLANDS

(Compiled by Mrs A. Fransen of the Consumentenbond)

Minimum prices were fixed by law for Dutch alcoholic beverages such as "jenever" and "vieux".

The Consumentenbond (the Dutch Consumers' Union) lodged a complaint against the "Camping gaz" company with the European Commission. It claims that the company has concluded a number of restrictive agreements.

Parliament passed a new hours of trading law: shops can now remain open until 5 p.m. on Saturdays.

The government department responsible turned down the Consumentenbond's request for radio and television time to broadcast consumer news.

UNITED KINGDOM

(Compiled by the British Consumers Association)

I. Protection

. Asbestos

The Department of Prices and Consumer Protection and the Health and Safety Executive have agreed a voluntary asbestos labelling scheme for consumer goods with the asbestos industry. The Government has also set up a committee to review possible health risks to workers and the general public from exposure to asbestos. Finally, the Food Additives and Contaminants Committee is to review the use of asbestos in the food industry.

. Consumer safety

In February the Department of Prices and Consumer Protection issued a consultative document on possible general product safety legislation. The document suggests various ways in which the present law might be improved, including a new power to enable the sale of any dangerous product to be banned when necessary and the possible introduction of a general law requiring those who supply goods to accept a general duty of care in relation to safety. All those interested were asked to submit their views by the end of May. The Department also reported on the pilot accident surveillance system and announced that it intends to proceed with a system for collecting information on accidents in the home.

. Prams and pushchairs

A draft regulation covering the safety of prams and pushchairs has been circulated for comment. It includes requirements on stability, efficiency of brakes, the provision of attachment points for safety harnesses and the adequacy of locking devices on folding prams and pushchairs.

. Lead in petrol

The maximum lead content of petrol has been 0.55 grams per litre since 1 November 1974. This will be brought down to 0.50 grams per litre as soon as practicable and to 0.45 grams per litre by 1978. It is intended to set standards at 0.40 grams by 1981 in line with Community regulations.

. Business sales disguised as private sales

Regulations to require information to be given in advertisements are to be introduced.

. Unit pricing of meat

A report on the meat pilot scheme has been circulated and discussions are taking place with the trade, enforcement officers and consumers before regulations are drafted.

• Biscuits

An Order laying down standard metric quantities for the sale of biscuits makes them the first grocery item for 23 years to be added to the 40 or so which have to be sold in prescribed quantities.

II. Information

• Price check scheme

Red triangles enclosing the words "Price Check" have appeared in many shops. The scheme, which is part of the counter-inflation policy, is voluntary. Agreement was reached last January to hold price increases on goods in the scheme to a maximum of 5p in the pound for six months. The Secretary of State discussed the scheme with consumer organizations before it was launched.

• Voluntary codes of practice

A number of codes of practice have been launched this year as a result of discussions between various trades and the Office of Fair Trading. For example, two associations which account for approximately 85% of all shoe repairs have launched a code which requires both the display of a current price list and the issue of a ticket to the customer showing the cost of repair and the estimated collection date.

An association representing 75% of launderers and dry cleaners has agreed a code which excludes limitation of liability and requires fair compensation for loss or damage to goods.

Codes also exist for footwear retailers, car repairs, secondhand cars and electrical servicing.

• Local price surveys

Over 250 local government price comparison surveys have been approved by the Department of Prices and Consumer Protection since the Government announced grants for such schemes last year.

• Prescribed quantities

Joint meetings between government, trade and consumer representatives take place regularly to discuss metric ranges for the foods that must be sold in fixed quantities by law. Regulations have already been passed for pasta, salt, sugar, flour, breakfast cereals, oats, dried vegetables, fats, dried fruit and biscuits.

• Director-General of Fair Trading

The new Director-General is Professor Gordon Borrie, formerly a member of the Consumers Association's Council, Professor of English Law at Birmingham University and author of a book on consumer law.

. Common agricultural policy

Consumer organizations had a meeting with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to discuss the Farm Price Review and the method of calculating the effect on consumer prices.

. Legal profession

A Royal Commission on the Legal Profession has been established to inquire into the law and practice relating to the provision of legal services in England and Wales.

. National Health Service

A Royal Commission has been established to review the NHS.

. Post Office

A committee has been established to review the working of postal services, telecommunications and other Post Office services.

. Product safety

A round table meeting of twenty-odd consumer and safety organizations was held at the National Consumer Council to discuss a consultative document.

III. Documents

. Fuel

A Price Commission report looks into the wide variation in prices for different fuels and for the same fuels in different parts of the country and in one area.

. Fish

A Price Commission report examines the build-up of prices between landing and retail sale.

. Fresh food

The Price Commission has published a comparative study of fresh food prices at various retail outlets. (Which? has published similar survey.)

. Lead in food

The Food Additives and Contaminants Committee has published a review of the Lead in Food Regulations. Its report takes account of the findings of the Working Party on the Monitoring of Foodstuffs for Heavy Metals and of the Toxicity Sub-Committee of the Committee on Medical Aspects of Chemicals in Food and the Environment which examined the medical aspects of lead in food. It recommended a further reduction in the current limit for infant foods (from 0.5 mg/kg to 0.2 mg/kg). Reductions for other foods were also recommended.

. Food flavours

The FACC has also published report on flavours.

. Transport policy

The Department of the Environment has issued a consultative document on transport policy. To quote the foreword: "The document represents the outcome of a comprehensive review of transport policy. But the review can be completed only when the Government has had the opportunity of consulting those with an interest in the transport system - those who operate transport, those who work in the transport industries and, not least, the travelling public."

. Office of Fair Trading

The second OFT report reveals that over 400 000 complaints made by UK consumers about goods and services were notified to the Director-General of Fair Trading in twelve months. It also shows that the OFT's Central Register of Convictions based on information provided by local authorities last year logged 1 385 prosecutions under the Trade Descriptions Act 1968, leading to the imposition of penalties totalling £138 960. The main offences proven under the Act were false trade descriptions of goods (837 cases) and false price offers (421).

There were 2 888 cases under the Food and Drugs Acts with penalties amounting to £169 137; the main offence here was supplying food not of the nature, substance or quality demanded (1 640 cases). Cases brought under the Weights and Measures Act 1963 totalled 1 052 with penalties amounting to £55 629; short weight or measure cases accounted for 571 of the total

. Fluorocarbons

A report by the Department of the Environment's Central Unit on Environmental Pollution concludes that although the hypotheses that fluorocarbons 11 and 12 can effect the ozone layer are scientifically plausible, the effect is likely to be slight. As a precautionary measure, manufacturers are being asked to intensify their search for alternative aerosol propellants.