

European Consumer Day celebrated

This year's European Consumer Day was celebrated with a flurry of activity in Republic Street, Valletta. For this year's event, and as part of the EU's information campaign on consumer rights, the European Commission teamed up with the Consumer and Competition Division and the European Consumer Centre (Malta) to celebrate Consumer Day in a way that will bring consumer rights closer to the citizen.

The event began with an introductory speech by Dr Joanna Drake, Head of the European Commission Representation in Malta. She referred to the Commission's adoption, this week, of the Consumer Policy Strategy for 2007-2013, which sets out the challenges, role, priorities and actions of EU consumer policy for this period. The strategy's overall objectives are to empower consumers, to enhance their welfare and to protect them effectively. Dr Drake also referred to the Commission's vision of achieving a single, simple set of rules for the benefit of consumers and retailers alike by 2013.

In his first public address as Minister for Finance, Economy and Investment, Tonio Fenech referred to the important role of consumers within the economy and said that consumers should be given the best value for money, products and services. He also announced that the Government will continue to improve the regulatory structures that protect consumers' rights and that ensure fair competition.

Consumer and Competition Division director Mireille Vella and European Consumer Centre Malta manager Claude Sammut also addressed the public. Both pointed out that Consumer Day was a special occasion dedicated to the rights and benefits enjoyed by consumers, which are important to each and every one of us.

Dr Vella called on all consumers and authorities to renew their efforts to ensure that consumer rights are safeguarded and enjoyed. She reiterated the message that information and education was of extreme importance when seeking to ensure that consumer rights are respected. She said that it is not enough to have laws prepared and passed; there also needs to be a level of awareness as well as effective implementation. She said it is essential that consumers are allowed to enjoy their right to information but it was also extremely important that all information provided is correct and in no way misleading.

Mr Sammut stressed the point that the European Consumer Centre is a strong network across the EU that is actively working to promote consumer rights. The main aim of the ECC is to promote consumer confidence, and it is working to achieve this aim by informing consumers of their rights and also by offering practical guidance to those who encounter difficulties while carrying out transactions within the European Union.

Mr Sammut also stressed his desire to see consumers themselves becoming more proactive in seeking information and assist-ance and said that the ECC

always welcomes consumers who need assistance or who simply need guidance and information.

As part of the morning's activities, an information booth was set up in front of the Law Courts, manned by information officers who provided passers-by with advice on their consumer-related questions. Promo people also distributed fact sheets and information material to people in Valletta. Ray Calleja, the face of the EU's consumer rights campaign, also mingled with the crowd to encourage them to find out more about their consumer rights. In addition, the Consumer and Competition Division awarded prizes to the schoolchildren who had won competitions held during 2007 for readers of the Saghtar and Taghna it-Tfal publications. The aim of the competitions was to create more awareness and know-ledge of consumerism and responsible citizenship.

Every year, European Consumer Day marks an important event for us all. This is the day when particular attention is given to consumers' rights and the important economic role played by consumers in all countries across the globe, including the European Union.

To mark this day, the European Commission, earlier this week, launched a new poster campaign that uses the striking image of a woman with her head covered by a stark white shopping bag. It aims to send a clear message that consumers are too often left operating in the dark – in the supermarkets, when they shop online, or when they try to switch their phone or energy supplier. The new poster campaign centres on the message: "Know Your Rights, Use Your Rights". It is an appeal to consumers to take power back in their hands, to get informed and to use their power of comparison and of choice. When launching the poster campaign, EU Consumer Commissioner Meglena Kuneva asserted that "We want to put consumers back where they belong, as a driving force for competition and for the economy".

To commemorate this day, a supplement in newspaper format was also issued and distributed in Malta by the European Commission.

The message delivered by all speakers during today's event was loud and clear: the main objective of Consumer Day is not only to serve as a reminder that all consumers within the European Union are protected by a specific body of legislation protecting their rights, but it is also important for consumers to actively seek information and assistance where necessary. This can be achieved by calling Consumer House on 2122 1901 or the Consumer and Competition Division on 8007 4400.
