

## **RCNI Submission to the Consumer strategy Group, July 2004**

The RCNI would like to take the opportunity to thank you for inviting our submission on this important consultation. Although we understand that the limited life span of the advisory group necessitates a rapid turnaround, we are concerned that inadequate time has been assigned for this public consultation. We expect this will be remedied with a more realistic consultation process for the draft National Consumer Strategy.

As a non-governmental community based service provider, we have a number of issues that we would see as important in safeguarding the rights of the consumers we serve. However, for the purposes of this consultation we would like to limit our input to you to one core principle that we see as vital.

Our client base is, by the nature of our business, vulnerable. One of our primary aims in our service delivery approach therefore is the empowerment of our clients. In practice this means it is vital to deliver consumer choice as to when and how individual consumers wish to engage with the services we and others provide.

The requirements to regulate and protect consumers coupled with funding dependencies means that the independence and integrity of the unique functions offered by the NGO sector is perpetually vulnerable. It is vital, in the interests of our consumers, that we maintain our independent position.

Holding ourselves, each other and policy makers accountable to the needs of consumers of our services is an essential function of the NGO sector which we would expect any consumer strategy to value and promote.

Our key concern therefore in this submission is that the advisory group is cognisant of and remains committed to the independence of the needs of the NGO sector in Ireland. We imagine your task must be heavily focused on the amelioration of the negative effects of market forces on consumer choice and therefore power. Whereas in our sector all too often it is not only market forces that endanger the clients' spaces of empowerment but the natural propensity towards centralisation, standardisation, and homogenisation in the management and securing of service provision.