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Consumer Council of Fiji



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FEATURE ARTICLE

How Consumer Voices Shaped Fairer Markets in 2025?

The Consumer Council of Fiji (CCoF) has long maintained that complaints are not just problems to be resolved individually; they are signals of deeper market behaviour. Patterns identified through the National Consumer Helpline, walk-in consultations, and written complaints informed targeted interventions across essential services, retail markets, food establishments, transport systems, and financial services. The result was measurable progress, not through punitive action alone, but through evidence-based engagement, transparency, and sustained accountability.

Rather than viewing complaints as isolated disputes, the Council treat them as early warning systems highlighting systemic weaknesses. Recurrent feedback across regions and demographics pointed to structural barriers, information gaps, and compliance failures that required intervention beyond individual redress.

This approach was particularly evident in sectors where services affect daily livelihoods transport, food, retail pricing, and insurance. By combining consumer reports with proactive market surveillance, the Council strengthened its ability to verify concerns, engage service providers constructively, and advocate for corrective measures that benefited the wider public.

Strengthening Accountability in Essential Transport Services

One of the most impactful areas of consumer-led change in 2025 involved Fiji's e-transport system. As the transition to card replacement and registration progressed, consumers raised persistent concerns about accessibility, long queues, lack of information, and procedural barriers, especially affecting the elderly, persons with disabilities, and those in rural and maritime communities.

Rather than limiting its response to complaint resolution, the Council undertook continuous surveillance across replacement and registration sites nationwide. These on-the-ground assessments enabled officers to observe service delivery firsthand, verify consumer experiences, and identify recurring operational gaps.

Evidence gathered through monitoring revealed that restrictions on third-party applications disproportionately disadvantaged vulnerable groups who relied on caregivers or family members for assistance. Following advocacy by the Council, this restriction was lifted,

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allowing representatives to apply on behalf of consumers who could not reasonably navigate the process themselves.

Consumer feedback and surveillance findings also highlighted that replacement deadlines were unrealistic for many communities with limited access to outreach drives. As a result of the Council's engagement, deadlines were extended, easing pressure on consumers and reducing the risk of travel disruption. Furthermore, awareness gaps in remote areas prompted expanded outreach efforts, ensuring that no community was excluded from the transition.

Over time, these interventions led to noticeable improvements in queue management, clarity of information, and responsiveness at service sites. This case demonstrated how consumer voices, when supported by verification and sustained advocacy, can influence operational reform and reinforce accountability in essential public-facing systems.

Raising Standards in Restaurants and Eateries

Food safety emerged as another critical area where consumer feedback drove sector-wide change. Throughout the year, the Council received a growing number of complaints relating to hygiene standards, food handling practices, and regulatory compliance in restaurants and eateries.

Recognising the public health implications, the Council intensified its surveillance across dining establishments nationwide. These inspections confirmed that the issues raised by consumers were not isolated incidents, but indicative of broader non-compliance within the sector. Findings included poor hygiene practices, unsafe food storage, inadequate certification, and lapses in basic safety standards.

Transparency became a key tool in addressing these concerns. By bringing national attention to restaurant conditions through media engagement and public statements, the Council empowered consumers to make informed choices while signalling clearly to operators that substandard practices would not be ignored.

Collaboration with enforcement agencies ensured that findings were formally referred for enforcement action and followed up. During inspections, some operators took immediate corrective action, improving cleanliness, strengthening food safety protocols, and ensuring compliance with licensing requirements.

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This intervention reinforced a fundamental message: consumer health and safety are non-negotiable. It also demonstrated how sustained surveillance, amplified consumer voices, and regulatory coordination can drive accountability across an entire industry.

Exposing Price Discrepancies and Protecting Consumer Rights

In the retail sector, 2025 saw heightened attention on pricing accuracy, a basic yet critical consumer right. Complaints regarding discrepancies between shelf prices and checkout prices began to surface alongside findings from the Council's routine supermarket surveillance.

Consumers reported being charged more at the checkout than advertised, particularly for discounted or promotional items. Council officers independently observed similar inconsistencies during in-store monitoring across multiple divisions. The convergence of consumer feedback and surveillance data confirmed that the issue was systemic. Investigations revealed that promotional prices were often not reflected at checkout unless consumers actively challenged the charge. This practice placed an unfair burden on consumers, particularly during peak shopping periods when vigilance is reduced.

In response, the Council issued an urgent public alert to warn consumers and draw immediate attention to the issue. The alert sparked national discussion, reinforcing that accurate pricing is not optional, it is a legal and ethical obligation. The outcome was twofold: consumers became more empowered to check receipts and question discrepancies, while retailers were publicly reminded of their responsibilities. Continued surveillance served as a deterrent, strengthening accountability within the retail sector and protecting consumers from financial loss.

Fair Redress Through Resolution

Several cases demonstrated how trader engagement, guided by the Council, led to improved business practices. In instances involving lay-by cancellations and rigid refund policies, Council intervention prompted traders to review their terms, acknowledge oversights, and provide appropriate redress. Importantly, these outcomes were achieved without litigation, highlighting the value of mediation in achieving timely and equitable solutions. Businesses that cooperated demonstrated that accountability and goodwill can coexist, earning recognition for resolving matters fairly and restoring consumer confidence.

Financial Security for Consumers

Financial services complaints also featured prominently in 2025, particularly where consumers faced uncertainty over insurance coverage and deductions. In one notable intervention,

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concerns raised by policyholders revealed a misalignment between updated premiums and payroll deductions, creating the risk of policy lapses. Through persistent engagement with insurers, brokers, and government stakeholders, the Council helped clarify the issue and secure a resolution that protected consumers from financial loss. Premium shortfalls were waived, coverage remained intact, and policyholders were assured that their beneficiaries would not be disadvantaged.

This case underscored the importance of advocacy and collaboration in complex financial matters, where individual consumers may lack the leverage or information needed to protect their rights.

Future of Accountability

The experiences of 2025 reaffirm a central truth: consumer voices matter. When consumers speak up, and when those voices are supported by evidence, surveillance, and principled advocacy, markets respond. From transport systems and food safety to retail pricing and financial security, the year demonstrated that meaningful change does not always begin with sweeping reforms. Often, it starts with a single complaint, multiplied by many, forming a collective call for fairness.

As Fiji's marketplace continues to evolve, the Council remains committed to ensuring that consumer voices are not only heard, but acted upon. The progress achieved in 2025 stands as a reminder that fair markets are not accidental; they are built through vigilance, accountability, and the active participation of informed consumers. Looking ahead, the Council encourages consumers to continue speaking up, because every complaint has the potential to become a catalyst for change, and every voice contributes to building markets that are fairer, safer, and more responsive for all.

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