



Consumer news

We want you

Long-term care costs

Do you or a relative fund long-term care or are you due to? How will you meet the cost? Tell Ian Robinson.

Car safety: whiplash and recalls

We're looking for your stories if you've had a whiplash injury or if your car has been subject to a recall. Contact George Marshall-Thornhill.

Property valuation



If you've recently bought a property and paid for a valuation report of any type, Teresa Fritz would like to hear from you. Were you given any choice about who should do it and were you charged a fair fee?

Privacy concerns

Do you worry about how much information you're giving away by using a supermarket loyalty card? Does this or other privacy issues worry you? Tell Nikki Ratcliff.

Telecoms services

Do you want a better deal on your telecoms services? Whether you want to see if bundling services can save you money or you're unhappy with a current bundle, tell Ceri Stanaway.

Pension annuities

Are you about to convert your pension into an annuity or have you recently been through this process? Contact Teresa Fritz.

Send full contact details to helpwanted@which.co.uk or Help Wanted, PO Box 44, Hertford X SG14 1SH. Go to www.which.co.uk/helpwanted for more requests online. (We cannot respond personally to all replies)

Scheme is making it easier to check out standards of hygiene

Food hygiene pilot reveals mixed results



Some inspectors' reports on food standards are now published

FOOD SAFETY

An expanding scheme to make food safety inspection results public is making it easier to find out how clean your local eatery, takeaway or child's school canteen is.

With more than 100 councils signed up, the hygiene scores have revealed, for example, that some schools and nursery kitchens are falling short of the mark. The scores, accessed through the website of the Food Standards Agency (FSA), are based on inspections by environmental health officers. A pilot is testing how well the 'scores-on-the-doors' system works before the FSA decides on a national scheme aimed at improving food standards across the UK.

We looked at the ratings for schools and nurseries in 15 randomly picked councils across the UK. While most had achieved two stars or above – indicating good conditions in the five-star scheme – eight had some schools achieving zero or one star, showing that improvements were needed.

Five out of 45 schools in Cheltenham and four out of 96 in the London borough of Southwark achieved either zero or one star. In the London borough of Brent, 17 out of 97 inspected schools achieved one star, while one school didn't get any stars.

In the Hertfordshire borough of Broxbourne, eight out of 34 schools and

INSPECTORS' CHECKLIST

The standards that are checked in school kitchens

- Food hygiene
- Method of handling food
- Conditions of premises
- Cleaning practices
- Temperature control
- Food storage
- Hygiene training
- State of cleanliness and repair
- Confidence in management
- Food safety risk assessment

nurseries had zero or one star. A Broxbourne Council spokesman said: 'Issues at schools with low ratings ranged from structural issues, lack of a food safety management system, date coding of foods, through to cleaning and sanitising arrangements.'

'All of the zero- and one-star schools have been revisited and have completed work or work is in progress. The council's website will be updated to include information on progress to reassure the public.'

Some councils follow a different system from star ratings. In Edinburgh, one primary school and two nurseries have been issued with an 'improvement required' certificate.

Jenny Morris, Policy Officer at the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, said: 'This is worrying because children are a captive audience and I'm worried parents will be put off school meals. I wouldn't rush to condemn the schools without seeing the actual reports but when there's the threat of further action, parents should be concerned.'

Which? wants all councils to publish results online

TAKE ACTION!

■ Which? is campaigning for all councils to publish inspection results online and for food outlets to display their scores. Go to www.which.co.uk/hygienscores and also www.food.gov.uk/safereating for details.

70,603number of reported cases of
food poisoning in UK in 2006

HEALTH PROTECTION AGENCY

£1,600estimated spending online
per person in the UK this year

IMRG

607number of plumbers
recommended on Which? Local

WHICH?



We asked stores to match their cheaper online prices and had some success

Haggle for savings

SHOPPING

High-street shoppers could save hundreds of pounds on electrical goods by doing a little homework online beforehand.

Our research shows that if you're prepared to ask, some stores will match their website prices, which are often less for the same products. But we found that policies vary between companies and not every manager is happy to match online prices.

In September, we sent mystery shoppers to leading retail chains in four major cities, armed with lists of popular electrical goods of varying value.

At PC World, shop assistants had no hesitation in matching store prices where we quoted lower web prices, saving £80 on a laptop in one case.

At Currys stores, staff needed a little more persuasion to match online prices. Our shoppers saved £105 on a TV at two Currys stores. At one, once the assistant had checked the price, they were happy to match, while at the other we had to press for the online price. But getting a reduction can be hit and miss: we could get only a £50 discount on the same TV at a third Currys store.

Currys told us that in general, its policy is to match online prices, but it allows stores some flexibility.

The policy at Comet was more confused at stores

we visited. Two said that they wouldn't reduce the price but offered gift vouchers. Meanwhile, a Comet store in London refused to cut a DVD player by £14 to match the online price, but the assistant in a Manchester outlet allowed us to reserve the item at that price online while at the store.

Despite our results, Comet said most of its prices are the same but it would match where they differ.

See also 'Can you bag a bargain online', p30.



A selection of goods we tried to haggle over

SUCCESS OF PRICE MATCH REQUESTS ACROSS THE UK

	LOCATION	PRODUCT	WEB PRICE (£)	STORE PRICE (£)	PRICE MATCHED?
COMET	Cardiff	Sony DVD recorder (RDRGXD360)	179.99	199.99	No: £20 gift voucher offered
	Edinburgh	Sony DVD recorder (RDRGXD360)	179.99	199.99	No: £20 gift voucher offered
	London	Sony DVD player (DVPNS36B)	45.99	59.99	No
	Manchester	Sony DVD player (DVPNS36B)	45.99	59.99	Yes: £14 off in-store online order
CURRYS	Cardiff	Panasonic TV (TX26LMD)	494.95	599.99	Yes: £105.04 saved
	Edinburgh	Panasonic TV (TX26LMD)	494.95	599.99	Yes: £105.04 saved
	London	Panasonic TV (TX26LMD)	494.95	599.99	No: £50 discount offered
	Manchester	Panasonic TV (TH37PX70)	898.99	899.99	Yes: £1 saved
PC WORLD	Cardiff	Advent laptop (7203)	399.99	479.99	Yes: £80 saved
	Edinburgh	Fujitsu Siemens LCD monitor (1818)	599.99	599.99	N/a: same price
	London	Sony laptop (TX5MNV)	1,399	1,449.99	Yes: £50.99 saved
	Manchester	Philips laptop (X59)	549.99	549.99	N/a: same price

TAKE ACTION!

■ Check pricing policies online or with customer helplines. Take printouts with you for prices of your chosen product at your chosen store and always ask staff to match the lowest price.

Which? Local goes live

CONSUMER ACTION

Finding a good plumber or builder can be time consuming and could leave you out of pocket if you make the wrong choice.

But a new Which? website can help members steer clear of the cowboys by putting you in touch with the best businesses in your area.

Which? Local features members' recommendations of traders and services that they've used in their area.

We've expanded the site during the past 12 months and it now covers all of the UK, with more than 7,500 recommendations covering more than 200 trades and professions, from hairdressers to plumbers. For

example, the 'House and home' section contains everything from electricians to locksmiths.

Members rate companies out of five for overall service and value for money, and say why they'd recommend the trader.

If you can't find a recommended

service in your area, you can ask other members who live there for suggestions.

TAKE ACTION!

■ Go to www.which-local.co.uk and register with your membership number.

