

Bethan Jenkins' Column

This week, I have backed calls made by debt charity Credit Action for credit companies to respect advertising regulations when placing adverts on social networking websites such as Facebook.

According to the charity, credit companies are using the Facebook social networking site to target young people. Credit Action says adverts promising cheap loans for people with poor credit ratings are appearing on the site and many break advertising regulations.

It appears that credit companies are promoting new products such as payday loans secured against a salary and logbook loans secured against a car. In doing so many companies are breaking advertising regulations by not detailing the specifics of such loans, such as the amount of interest payable.

The charity has made a complaint to the Office of Fair Trading. It is now advising Facebook users to warn the website about adverts which break the rules.

Specific targeting of young people is a very worrying development, especially at a time when the current credit-crunch is taking its toll. It is estimated that Facebook has 50 million users worldwide – it is vital that all adverts relating to loans are clear and comply with regulations.

This week, I also urged would-be-entrepreneurs in the area to take advantage of the One Wales Government's Start Up scheme.

The £36m project is designed to help set up businesses and has been hailed as further proof that Plaid's policies are helping the economy to grow. The Start Up scheme was announced today by Plaid's Leader and Economy Minister Ieuan Wyn Jones. It's expected that around 10,000 jobs will be created throughout Wales as a result.

The Start Up scheme is expected to help create thousands of new companies throughout Wales and put a huge amount of Welsh people in jobs. I am urging everyone who is contemplating starting their own business to take advantage of this wonderful opportunity.

When Plaid entered government in the Assembly, we agreed to do so in order to achieve real improvements for the people of Wales. This scheme will allow people in some of our poorest communities to start up their own businesses and build a better future for themselves. The amount of jobs that such companies are expected to create will make a huge difference and shows that this Start up Scheme will reap rewards for whole communities, not just individuals.

Whilst the One Wales Government is working towards helping those struggling with heating costs and the general utility price inflation, I this week condemned news from British Gas owner Centrica of potential further bill

hikes for customers after revealing that continued high wholesale gas prices would hit results this year.

In January Centrica announced an increase in gas and electricity charges of 15 per cent.

The prospect of further price hikes is a hammer blow for hard pressed residential and business customers, who are already reeling. This increase is especially hard to swallow given Centrica's brazen admission that their object is to protect profits in its retail business.

Centrica announced a 15 per cent increase in bills in January, and four months later they are still more concerned about corporate results than hard pressed customers.

In previous rounds of price increases the energy companies have all followed suit at a respectable distance. It looks like consumers are to face yet more misery on top of rocketing food, mortgage and transport fuel costs.

In his budget speech Alistair Darling trumpeted an agreement that energy companies would invest more in helping fuel poor customers, but now suppliers are lobbying the regulator Ofgem to allow them to use some funds to keep the Home Heat helpline running."

Consumers are facing repeated inflation busting price rises simply to protect company profits. The UK Government's inaction is totally unacceptable, and we must have real action to help hard pressed consumers.