

# Consumer Choice

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DECEMBER 2016 / JANUARY 2017

## THE CAI... LIGHTING THE WAY FOR CONSUMERS FOR 50 YEARS.....

### € MONEY

CHILDCARE COSTS

MOBILE PHONE CONTRACTS

CONSUMING CULTURE

### ☕ LIFESTYLE

INTERNET-CONNECTED TOYS

FUEL-EFFICIENT CARS

CONSUMER RIGHTS

### 📷 PRODUCT TESTS

FRIDGES

SMARTPHONES

ROBOT VACUUM CLEANERS



## The Consumers' Association of Ireland

The Council is the policy-making body of CAI. Members are elected from within the CAI's membership at the Annual General Meeting.

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## December 2016/January 2017

Dear Member,

We approach the end of a decidedly challenging year. Its effects will only commence to be understood and experienced in 2017 and years that follow. Without a word regarding health, housing, insurance, finance or employment, I reflect how:

- Consumers remain unclear regarding their water charges and especially those who paid money and have no answer from Government as to whether or not they will receive a refund or a rebuttal.
- Consumers remain unclear as to why they have not seen the cost of many food, clothing, furnishing and white goods, sold through UK-based retailers established in Ireland, reduce in line with the fall in Sterling against the Euro.
- Consumers remain unclear as to the position, if there is any, being taken by the Department of Transport or the Department of the Environment regarding their ownership of Volkswagen cars. The EU consumer protection Commissioner Vera Jourová, when we met her in Dublin, confirmed her call made in November at the BEUC Assembly for compensation for consumers across the EU. Ireland is silent.
- Consumers remain unclear and without any advice as to the reason Ireland has not put Collective Action into our arsenal of consumer protection and are disadvantaged as a result.

• Consumers, throughout the past year when we celebrated 50 years of existence, have vocalised their astonishment at the complete lack of financial support from the exchequer for this Association.

As we ease out of 2016, I, and all here at the Consumers' Association of Ireland, remain as concerned as those commentators – but not quite as astonished. We have become acclimatised to our poor status that has served, in recent years, to make it impossible to bring clarity to the Irish consumer problems and whose concerns outlined above barely begin to outline their detriment. We remain massively under-resourced, which guarantees that our voice is being lost and our demands on behalf of the consumer here at home fall, for the most part, on deaf ears.

Consumers' rights are about much more than the ability to shop around, buy and complain! I would like to hope that 2017 will bring that reality to those in Government who need to understand it.

For now, I can only close by sincerely thanking you for your continued support and, on behalf of all of us at the CAI, wishing you and yours a very happy Christmas and a New Year that brings health, hope and a large dollop of informed positivity to your lives.

Slán agus beannacht.



### Our Reports

Reports in Consumer Choice are based on market research, laboratory tests or user surveys, all of which are independently and scientifically conducted. Free goods are never accepted for testing – all samples are purchased. Occasionally items may be borrowed for review purposes only.

The reports are produced in the main by our own Editorial staff. Some material is occasionally drawn from other foreign independent consumer magazines.

Because Consumer Choice carries no commercial advertising it is not swayed by bias or influence and can point out advantages and flaws in goods and services that other magazines may not be able to do.

Reports on any article relate only to the articles or goods mentioned, and not to any other article of the same or similar description. We do not necessarily price or report on all brands or models within the class, and the exclusion of any brand or model should not be taken as a reflection on it.

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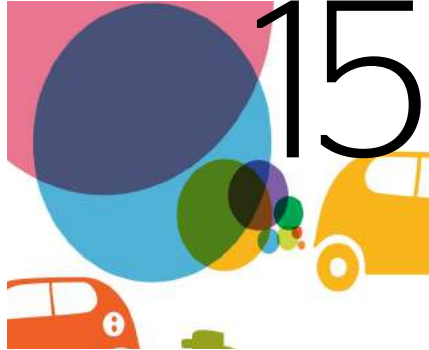
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## Good For The Soul – Appsolutely.

You will know from my previous news pieces how the European Commission, earlier this year, launched their ODR platform for Online Dispute Resolution. Well, not to be outdone in the progression of resolution, I read, courtesy of the *Journal*, how, in Spain, a new app, Confessor GO, detects a user's location and shows the location of priests around them who are ready to listen to their sins as well as providing the shortest travel route to get to them. The detail also includes the provision of basic information about the priest, including his name, date of birth and the year he was ordained as well as a list of the Ten Commandments. The article further advises how the bishop of the northern city of San Sebastian, Jose Ignacio Munilla, is one of around 100 clerics across Spain who have so far signed up to use the app to signal when they are available to hear confession.



## And Dance By the Light of the Moon

I saw it as a boy and it is now shown at cinemas across the country at Christmas in a resurgence of what it was like in the good old days of the 'Building and Loan'. But it is more than that and Frank Capra's 1946 classic film *It's A Wonderful Life* is bringing thousands of people to the small town of Seneca Falls in the USA. The town, in upstate New York between Rochester and Syracuse, is believed to be what inspired Capra to write the story and now, in its 21st year, the Annual Festival continues to attract newlyweds and many others to the town in celebration of his work.

The film is set in fictitious 'Bedford Falls' and the story goes that, while visiting an aunt in nearby Auburn in 1945, Capra got a haircut in Seneca Falls. He and the barber exchanged stories including one regarding a local man who, in 1917, jumped from the rather unique structure that is the town bridge, in an attempt to save a young girl. The storyline, the town layout, George Bailey's Building and Loan and especially the bridge used in the film give a clear indication that Seneca Falls was in Capra's mind when he built the Bedford Falls set in Culver City, California.

## FIOR OF FLYING



Silicon Republic recently carried the futuristic news that the flying car, the dream of millions of science fiction fans, has come one step closer to being a reality. This is because Munich-based Lilium Aviation (LA) has previously received funding from interested groups, including the European Space Agency, and has now secured a major financing deal with one of Europe's largest investors. The company has received €10 million in funding from the VC firm Atomico. So far, the company has not built a fully functional Lilium aircraft, but has managed to test a number of large-scale prototypes to the point where it expects to have its first vertical take-off and landing (VTOL) craft ready for sale in 2018. There is suggestion that the craft will be small, capable of fitting into, and taking off from, an area measuring approximately 15 square metres (suggested to be the average back garden), that its engines will swivel allowing speeds of up to 300kph and at an altitude of nearly 10,000 feet. Unsurprisingly, there is no price indication except that "it is expected that it will be put firmly in the luxury vehicle category".

Unsurprising, therefore, in Ireland, we will not be able to afford it when specialist seat belts, radar, back garden landing lighting, booster rockets, parachutes and ejector seats are added. And these before VRT, VAT, landing and takeoff licence fees, virtual tolls, other charges, more fees.....

But what about the poor cyclists....Hmmm!



# Finally - 'It's the thought that counts' - makes sense!

This is one that can spark some debate at the Christmas family gathering this year. The 33rd Annual PNC Wealth Management Christmas Price Index (Yes! There is such a thing) has produced this year's costing for the full purchase of the combined presents as put forward in the song 'The Twelve days of Christmas' - and it's quite expensive.

From the partridge and pear tree of

Day 1 right down to the 12 drummers drumming, the cost is now determined to be \$34,363 or €32,363.

The increases this year came only on four items. Partridges are up 20%; Pipers and Drummers have increased their rates by 2.75% (must be unionised); but it is the Turtle Doves, with an increase of almost 30%, that is causing a flap. The eight milking maids and

the nine lady dancers are considering serving notice on their employers. Farmers have been crying out for increases on geese and French hens but the competition from the EU producers is too severe. So, there you have it for another Christmas. A price comparison next year, as President Trump nears completion of his first year in office, will be merrily anticipated by all!

## www.thecai.ie

In the coming weeks, I am delighted to confirm to you all, we will be launching the new and upgraded CAI website. This is a much needed and eagerly awaited reality and so, thanks to our Chairman, we will be doing all in our power to highlight our services, our product tests, our lobbying, our magazine and our need for subscribing Members over the weeks and months ahead. Keep an eye to the CAI at [www.thecai.ie](http://www.thecai.ie).

## Fruit for Thought

The much discussed Apple AirPods are just released for sale in Ireland at the time of going to print. They went on sale in the US on the same date, December 13th, for \$159. This brings me to the point of my take on these. They are very expensive for Irish (or any) consumers at €179 a pair. They are easily mislaid, lost or stolen and so, for that reason, they must come with a 'buyer beware' tag.

The AirPods come with a wireless charging case that contains and stores up to 24 hours of battery life. It is charged with your lightning connector and you will manage to charge three hours of listening time in a 15 minute in-case charge. They connect immediately to all of your Apple products and are undoubtedly going to be enormously popular.

My last point is that the sale of these was delayed due to manufacturing issues and so I hope that these do not pose the problems that the wireless mouse devices did and which, certainly for so many users, was a frustrating and expensive experience.

If you get a set from Santa then I suggest you ensure your household insurance covers you for replacement in a case of loss/theft. Other than that - enjoy!

## Protecting Consumers' Interests and Their Children's Rights

Just prior to Christmas, we, and many other BEUC Members, lobbied our national consumer agencies, national product safety authorities and national data protection agencies to highlight the serious issues associated with three specific internet-connected toys.

Our partner organisation, the Norwegian Consumer Council (NCC), brought these issues to light in the course of a project they carried out. The NCC carefully examined the terms of use and privacy policies of three toys: the interactive dolls 'Hello Barbie' and 'My Friend Cayla' and the 'i-Que Intelligent Robot'. These toys connect to the internet

and use built-in microphones and speech recognition technologies in order to engage in 'conversations' with children.

The most problematic issues are related to personal data protection and product safety rules. In simple terms, these toys can be easily hacked making it possible for strangers to communicate via the toy with the children playing with it. We have outlined all of our concerns to the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission (CCPC) as well as the Data Protection Commissioner and await their responses.



Photo: Forbrukerrådet, the Norwegian Consumer Council

# Food & Health

 by Clodagh O'Donoghue

## 'Small' and 'local' defined for food labelling purposes

When shopping for food, it is important that consumers are given key nutrition information so that they know precisely what they are buying and eating. In the November 2014 issue of *Consumer Choice*, we reported on new EU regulations concerning the provision of food information on the packages of pre-packed food products. These regulations were introduced into Irish law on 13th December 2014 but, in order to give food businesses time to prepare for the new requirements, the date of application was set for 13th December 2016. From this date, most prepacked foods must provide mandatory nutrition information on ingredients, allergens, storage instructions or conditions of use and more. There are, however, some exemptions that mean that these requirements do not apply to all prepacked foods. The EU regulation recognises there are certain food businesses for which it would be a significant burden to provide the mandatory nutrition information and one such circumstance relates to manufacturers

that supply small quantities of foods, including hand-crafted foods, directly to the consumer or to local retailers for direct supply to the consumer. The EU regulation does not define exactly what is meant by the terms 'small' or 'local' and has left it up to individual member states to provide their own definitions. To this end, new legislation has been introduced to outline how these terms are to be interpreted and under what conditions this exemption will apply.

In order to determine the definitions, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland carried out a public consultation on behalf of the Department of Health. It was decided that the term 'local' is to be defined as not more than 100km from where the product is manufactured. In addition, to qualify as 'small quantities' the food supplied must be within the following limits: a) 250 kilograms or litres per week or 13,000 kilograms or litres of products per year or b) 500 units per week or 26,000 units per year. Manufacturers have the option of choosing to base the calculation of products supplied

on either weight/volume or unit figures. The weekly limits are set down for food manufacturers who produce throughout the year, whereas seasonal producers can avail of the total yearly amount if that is more appropriate to them.

Consumers should note that the obligation to declare nutrition information only applies to foods that are sold prepacked - so foods that are sold without packaging or that are packed on the same premises as they are sold are considered non-prepacked and are therefore exempt from the labelling requirements. Other foods that are exempted from having to provide mandatory nutrition information include chewing gum, salt and salt substitutes, herbs and spices, table top sweeteners, tea and unprocessed products that are made up of just one ingredient or category of ingredients.

## Going a little green at Christmas

Brussels sprouts have formed part of many a traditional Christmas dinner and yet they seem to divide opinion like no other vegetable, with some staunch advocates and admirers of the small green spheres and others who loath the very thought of them. The Brussels sprout is a member of the Brassica family along with cabbage, kale and broccoli and, like these other vegetables, sprouts are extremely nutritious, packing plenty of vitamins, folic acid and fibre into a compact little package as well as being a good source of potassium and iron. An additional bonus is the minimal impact these vegetables will have on the waistline - a typical Brussels sprout contains just eight to

ten calories.

Much of the bad press that these greens endure arises from their unpleasant smell - a result of the release of sulphur-containing chemicals when they are chopped or cooked - and their bitter flavour, though apparently some taste buds are more susceptible to this than others with genetics playing a part here. Added to this is the fact that Brussels sprouts have so often appeared over-boiled and bordering on mushy on the plate. However, the reputation of the humble sprout has undergone a metamorphosis in recent years with many becoming more sophisticated in their preparation of this much-maligned vegetable, eschewing boiling

for roasting or sautéing to bring out a natural sweetness.

Those who have in the past pushed their sprouts to the side of the plate might like to give them one last chance.... one suggested method is to cut each sphere in half, place them in a single layer on a baking tray, drizzle with olive oil and a little salt and roast until brown on the outside and tender on the inside. Alternatively, the Brussels sprouts can be steamed to soften them a little and then gently fried along with thin strips of bacon and finely chopped garlic. Some recipes for transforming the Brussels sprout into an enticing side dish can be found at [www.safefood.eu](http://www.safefood.eu).

# Money News



Money News by *Róisín Moloney Weekes*

## Virgin Media to pay ComReg €255,000 in penalties

**"Virgin Media Ireland Ltd. is to pay the Commission for Communications Regulation (ComReg) penalties amounting to €255,000 following an investigation."**

Virgin Media Ireland Ltd. is to pay the Commission for Communications Regulation (ComReg) penalties amounting to €255,000 following an investigation that revealed that Virgin did not provide 26,046 of its customers with a contract in a durable form, which is in contravention of the Consumer Information Regulations 2013.

ComReg imposed this penalty in the form of Fixed Payment Notices (FPNs), the first time it has done so. ComReg has the power to issue FPNs under the Consumer Protection Act 2007 for breaches of the Consumer Information Regulations 2013, which give consumers certain

protections where contracts are concluded online, by telesales or otherwise by means of what are called 'distance contracts'. These regulations apply to a range of services and goods as well as to digital content.

Virgin Media has accepted that it breached the 2013 Regulations and has said it will pay the penalty in full. ComReg investigated Virgin Media following a number of complaints from Virgin customers who said that they did not receive contracts from the company in durable form. Without such a contract, it was difficult for these customers to recognise and see precisely what they were

being charged for by the company.

If you, like many consumers, feel that you have a complaint to be made about a network provider you can make that complaint to ComReg. You must first try to resolve the issue with your network provider and you must make your complaint in writing, allowing ten days for a response. If you are not satisfied with the response you receive, then the next step is to contact ComReg, which will deal with the company directly. As you can see from the case outlined above, a complaint is worth making.

## Another change for first-time buyers

Yet another move by the Central Bank has drastically changed the playing field for first-time buyers. In an attempt to tighten up lending conditions in the mortgage market and to ensure borrowers and lenders could withstand future economic or property market shocks without the financial distress that we have recently experienced, prudent lending rules were introduced. These rules came in the form of a 20% deposit required for purchasers seeking a mortgage. The deposit for first-time buyers was less at 10% up to a threshold of €220,000 and 20% thereafter. Based on these rules, a first-time buyer who hoped to purchase a home for €350,000 would have to have a deposit of €48,000 saved.

Under the new changes, however,

first-time buyers will have to provide a deposit of 10% regardless of the value of a property when applying for a mortgage. Thus, first-time buyers will be able to borrow up to 90% of the property's value – so a home costing €350,000 will require a deposit of €35,000. However, for second-time and subsequent buyers, the 20% minimum deposit requirement continues to apply.

In addition, if the house is a new build, a Budget 2017 initiative may come into play for first-time buyers allowing them to claim tax rebates of up to €20,000 on properties valued up to €500,000. These aids for first-time buyers, while welcome, will no doubt increase the demand in a market where supply is so low.

The changes coincide with rapid

increases in rent, pressurising renters to buy. It is not surprising that auctioneers and estate agents are reporting a rush of interest in any suitable properties that come to the market as well as prices reaching far in excess of asking prices in particular areas of the country, especially Dublin.

The Central Bank did not alter the loan-to-income multipliers so this will continue to control property prices to some extent. The number of homes under construction now stands at 14,088, according to the Construction Information Services Ireland, but while this is a positive step, there is a long way to go in terms of supply and in the meantime the market will heat up.

# Consumer Market Scoreboard

The European Commission has recently published new data on the functioning of key consumer markets, the results of which show that most of them are performing better for consumers than they were two years ago when this study was last carried out. Significantly, consumers' trust in sellers with regard to consumer protection rules has increased across all 42 goods and services markets studied.

Within the service markets, the top three performers for consumers are holiday accommodation, such as hotels; cultural and entertainment services, such as theatres, cinemas, and museums; and sports services, such as gyms. In the goods category, the best performing markets are those for books, magazines and newspapers; entertainment goods, such as toys, games and musical instruments; and large household appliances, such as washing machines and fridges. When consumers report that they are happy with these markets they are being asked in terms of the trust they have in providers, whether they find it easy to compare offers, whether they believe there is choice available, and if they suffer little detriment from problems

and consider that their expectations are met. On the other end of the scale, the lowest performing markets for services include real estate, mortgages, investment products, private pensions and securities. In the goods category, they are second-hand cars, meat products and vehicle fuels. Within these markets, consumers report that trust in providers is lower, with consumers suffering higher detriment including financial or time loss. Consumers find it difficult to compare offers, are not happy with the choice available and report unmet expectations.

The scoreboard measures the detriment reported by consumers in each of the markets surveyed, with consumer detriment found to be highest in the telecommunications market. Detriment is defined by financial loss and other types of harm, such as time wasted and stress suffered by consumers after the purchase or use of a product. The highest overall detriment is reported in the telecommunications market as consumers often face problems with providers.

There have been greater improvements in the services markets

than in the goods markets, with financial services showing the biggest progress, though banking services continue to be the lowest performing sector among services markets. Consumers now have more trust in their banks, private pensions and investment funds. This suggests that EU policy efforts, such as the implementation of the Consumer Credit Directive and the EU awareness raising campaign carried out in 2014, are starting to pay off.

There is no doubt that greater efforts are required in the telecommunications market and policy improvements and consumer protections would be welcomed by consumers who suffer stress and time wasting so often when dealing with providers.



## Gift Vouchers

There is no doubt that gift vouchers are a convenient and popular gift used by all ages for all sorts of purposes. Gift vouchers offer a solution for consumers unsure of what gifts to buy. You may have received one or more gift vouchers this Christmas - it is estimated that up to 65% of Irish consumers receive gift vouchers but only half of this number will actually get the use of these vouchers.

As *Consumer Choice* has previously highlighted, consumers are not adequately protected by the law when it comes to gift vouchers. A major difficulty arises with expiry dates as many retailers do not offer a clear policy when it comes to a timeframe for using gift vouchers. Consumers who do not read the terms and conditions will be unaware that they may only have six months or 12 months to use their card before it expires. Maintenance

fees are another concern, with no common rule across retailers - some begin charging as much as €3 per month maintenance fees after the expiry of a certain period of time or after an initial purchase is made. There is also the risk that the voucher will be misplaced.

If you are purchasing a gift voucher or if you have received one, check the terms and conditions for the length of time the voucher will remain valid. Remember to share this information with the receiver of the gift also. Ask what happens to any unused portion of the voucher. Consider buying a voucher that can be used in a range of shops to maximise the chances of it being used. Keep the voucher in your wallet and use it as soon as possible. Do not under any circumstances put your voucher in a drawer or the chances are that this is where it will remain.







# Product/Tech News

Product News by *Clodagh O'Donoghue*

## An ironing board with a twist

Ironing is not a category known for its innovation but any improvements that do come along tend to be focused on the iron itself. Bucking that trend, manufacturing company Sharkk has instead looked to enhance the performance of the so-often-neglected ironing board with the introduction of the Flippr. This ironing board with a twist has the novel trick of being able to flip over, allowing you to iron both sides of garments without lifting them off the board to reposition them.

The Flippr can rotate 360° along its horizontal axis, so that halfway through ironing a jumper or shirt, say, all you have to do to get at the other side of the item without undoing all your hard work is to simply pivot the torso-shaped board around. The board rotates only at one end, with the rest of the solid aluminium frame staying in position and the iron itself can be left safely at the other end on a handy little wire rack, which is detachable or folds away neatly underneath the board.

The ironing surfaces on either side of the board are identical and other useful accessories that come supplied include a pair of clips that can hold trousers in place as you iron them and a small detail board that slides out to help with sleeves or collars.

The manufacturer claims that Flippr marks the first redesign of the ironing board since 1892 and that it can reduce ironing times by up to 80%. Certainly, it has caught the interest of many and reached its Kickstarter funding goal of \$20,000 in just 24 hours, with pledges continuing to pour in for the product, which will have a retail price of \$150 (€141 approx.).



The Flippr

## Playing around with numbers

There has been much talk about the need to promote the delivery of high-quality STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) education to our young people in Ireland and across the world and what better way to do it than through play. With the season that is in it, a couple of toys have caught our eye from the ever-growing range targeted at inquisitive minds that can help foster an interest in STEM subjects.

It is never too young to embark on a career in computer programming it seems – at least in the view of well-known toy manufacturer Fisher Price. Its Code-A-Pillar toy aimed at the three-years-plus age group looks a bit like a caterpillar with segments that split apart. Aiming to introduce the ideas behind coding, there is a motorised head segment with lights, sounds and blinking eyes and nine easy-to-connect pieces that small people can arrange and rearrange to create different patterns of movement. Depending on how the segments are configured, the toy will move forward, turn left or right, wiggle, dance and pause before moving again – with each piece lighting up as the action happens. A series of add-on pieces are due to become available that will bring new functions to the toy and increase the challenge involved.

For older children, products that allow them to try their hand at programming their own robot are on offer. The inch-high Ozobot can read and detect changes in colour, so you can programme it to move, play and dance through colour code patterns. Similarly, the Sphero SPRK+ encourages children of eight years and older to programme the ball via a visual block-based interface in the Lightning Lab app and they can see inside the ball to give them a better understanding of what they are controlling. The latest versions of these toys have added internet connectivity and marketers are stipulating that adult supervision is needed. Although these products have educational value in terms of developing an appreciation of robotics, given the recent findings reported in the current issue of *Consumer Choice* on internet-connected toys, due care should be taken and serious consideration should be given in relation to enabling any internet or social media aspects.

A less hi-tech offering with no such concerns comes from an Irish designer that looked to the ever-popular board game genre as a way of fostering a love and appreciation of numbers. The brainchild of a national school teacher from Waterford, Chase Across The Square is a board game that aims to help children learn maths and recall number facts in a fun way. Priced at €19.99, this board game is targeted at children of seven years and older and is available in leading Irish toy shops, as is the Code-A-Pillar, which sports a €65 price tag. Other mentioned products are available online.

The products featured on these pages have not been tested by the Consumers' Association of Ireland and their inclusion here is not, in any way, an endorsement of them.

## Putting you in the picture

In today's world, people are constantly taking photos but these are rarely printed out or displayed in any way – often they remain trapped in the device on which they were taken or possibly transferred to a memory card or hard drive where they languish indefinitely. The digital photo frame market, which looked to provide an answer by displaying a slide show of shots, appeared to be gaining momentum in the mid to late 2000s only to wane somewhat in recent years. Manufacturers have looked to address the issues that have hampered the widespread uptake of digital photo frames, including the low resolution of their screens and the fact that so many photos displayed were not of sufficiently high quality.

One new smart photo frame from US company Aura is so clever that it will show the best photos from a user's phone, without requiring any effort from the user. Other digital photo frames will require a user to manually choose and transfer images but the Aura frame and its accompanying app reportedly will do the job for you. The app – which is currently only available on Apple devices but due to be released for Android soon – first selects pictures of people that the user photographs most often and then weeds out any shots that are low in contrast or resolution, blurry or duplicated, leaving only quality photos in the selection. In case there are any compromising shots on your device, the app will also avoid choosing any photos that contain nudity so as to avert any potentially embarrassing situations when you have guests around. Using the app, the main user can invite multiple people to contribute photos to the Aura frame, each from their own device – and these will all be displayed on the 2048x1536 resolution, 9.7 inch screen that can be plugged into the wall or stood on a shelf.

In another recent product release, Canada-based Memento Electronics was certainly thinking big when it approached the design of its smart frame, which sports a screen of either 25 or 35 inches in size with almost-4K 3249 x 2160 resolution. Sensors automatically adjust the brightness of the pictures to make the digital images look their best and almost like high-quality prints. The Memento frame offers no physical controls, with all settings managed via wi-fi using the apps for iOS/Android smart devices or PC and Mac computers. Once uploaded, images can be organised into different playlists, which can then be activated via the apps, and you can decide how long each image should be displayed for – from five minutes to weeks and, indeed, forever. In addition, a sensor constantly monitors the ambient light and adjusts the brightness of the screen as needed – making images brighter in strong sunlight and dimmer as the room grows darker.

These are pricey devices and are not available on this side of the Atlantic quite yet, but their arrival, signalling a renewed interest in this category, could mean that digital photo frames may be poised for a resurgence.

## Never miss a trick

A new global survey from Microsoft has looked at the growing problem of tech scams and reveals that the most vulnerable group may not be who you might expect. The online survey polled a sample of 1,000 adults aged 18 and older from Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Denmark, France, Germany, the UK, India, Singapore, South Africa and the US.

The survey found that two out of three consumers online encountered some kind of tech support scam in the last year. In general, one out of five people polled revealed that they did not immediately recognize a tech support scam and continued their interaction – as a result, they may have clicked on a link, visited a malicious website, downloaded software, given the scammers remote access to their

device, or provided credit card information or other payments. Although 11% opted out before they were out of pocket, 9% admitted that they lost money to fraudsters.

It is not surprising that young adults aged 18-34 years, who spend so much of their lives online, encountered tech support scams at the highest rates compared to those in older age groups. What is unexpected, however, is the finding that young people are not as shrewd as you might think and that older online users do not get enough credit for their ability to safely navigate these online threats. Among those who encountered tech support scams, more than a third of 18- to 24-year-olds and 43% of those aged 25-34 years fell victim to these frauds. In contrast, older consumers appear to be better at keeping their guard up, with just 16% of 55- to 65-year-olds and 17% of those over 65 falling into the scammers' traps.

The Microsoft report found that victims over 65 years are most often scammed via an unsolicited call on their phone, whereas millennials –

those in the 18-34 age group – are more likely to have been redirected to a fraudulent website or tricked into clicking on a pop-up advertisement.

The survey also specifically asked if respondents had been targeted by scammers falsely presenting themselves as Microsoft representatives, a huge problem for the technology company. Over the last two years, Microsoft has received complaints from more than 175,000 customers about tech support scams in which fraudsters often seek to demand payments to 'fix' computers they have hacked.

Consumers of all age groups, online or not, need to stay constantly alert to avoid falling prey to scammers, who grow ever-more ingenious and sophisticated. If you feel you have spotted a scam, you should report it to the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission on 01 402 5555 and the Garda Bureau of Fraud Investigation on 01 6663777.





## From Cover to Cover...*Consumer Choice* at Christmas

The Consumers' Association of Ireland celebrates 50 years in existence this year, with the Association's magazine, *Consumer Choice*, emerging in the form we currently know it in 1985. With over 30 years of December issues under our belt, we bring you some Christmas-themed cover pages from bygone years.







## 50 Facts The Irish Consumer Needs To Know

The Consumers' Association of Ireland (CAI) has spent the last 50 years working in the interests of Irish consumers to improve the level of protection available and seeking to inform and educate them of their rights and entitlements. So, as we reach the half-century mark, here is a recap the current state of consumer protection in Ireland and 50 things that the Irish consumer needs to know.

- 1.** Retailers can charge whatever price they like as, in general, there is no pricing control.



- 2.** There is no legislation to prevent retailers from increasing their prices to take advantage of a special occasion or time of year.

- 3.** Retailers generally have to display prices where the consumer can see them – different types of service providers have to adhere to different rules about how their prices are displayed.

- 4.** With no pricing control, consumers need to shop around for the best available value.

- 5.** Consumers do not have the right to buy a product at the price displayed on it – retailers have the right to make a genuine mistake.

- 6.** Retailers must not deliberately mislead consumers as to the price of a good.

- 7.** If consumers notice that a retailer is engaging in misleading pricing or failing to display pricing, they can report the issue to the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission.

- 8.** The price of products on sale in Ireland must be displayed clearly in euro – but the euro price does not have to be larger or more obvious than the price in other currencies.

- 9.** Consumers do not have the right to return a product if they change their mind about a purchase bought in a shop – the shop may operate a returns policy but this is a goodwill gesture rather than a legal requirement.

- 10.** Consumers have the right to look for a repair, refund or replacement from the retailer if a good is faulty or not fit for purpose.

- 11.** A good must be 'as described' and if it is not, consumers have the right to look for a repair, refund or replacement from the retailer.

- 12.** Your contract is with the retailer and it is the retailer, not the manufacturer, that is responsible for sorting out a valid complaint.

- 13.** Retailers are not required by law to give a receipt but consumers should always request one.

- 14.** Retailers are entitled to look for a receipt as proof of purchase when dealing with a consumer who is returning goods for any reason.

- 15.** A receipt is not the only means to provide 'proof of purchase' - a credit or debit card statement may suffice.

- 16.** If you buy a good from an individual - for example, on eBay - you will not have the same consumer rights as if you bought the item from a business.

- 17.** When buying online within the EU, consumers have all the same rights that relate to a purchase made in a shop as well as some additional rights.

- 18.** When buying online within the EU, consumers have a 14-day cooling off period during which they can cancel the order for any reason, including because they have changed their mind.

- 19.** The 14-day cooling off period will not apply when goods have been made to a customer's specifications or have been personalised in some way – such as curtains made to measure or a name put on a t-shirt.

- 20.** The cooling off period is also NOT applicable when booking tickets for concerts and sport events or for flights, holidays or perishable items.

- 21.** When buying online from outside the EU, consumers do not have the protection of the

EU Consumer Rights Directive and must look to the returns and refunds policies of each seller.

- 22.** When buying online from outside the EU, you may have to pay VAT and customs or excise duties depending on the value of the goods purchased.



- 23.** Allowing goods purchased online to be bundled into one package to save postal/ packaging charges can bring the overall total value over the VAT limit or liability (currently (€22).

- 24.** Where an online purchase exceeds the VAT threshold and it becomes payable upon delivery, (if you want to receive the goods) there will also be an administration charge added.

- 25.** When buying a service over the phone or on the doorstep, consumers have a 14-day cooling off period during which they are allowed to change their mind and withdraw from the contract without penalty.

- 26.** Retailers are currently allowed to specify an expiry date on gift vouchers.

- 27.** Retailers are currently allowed to apply a maintenance fee to gift cards.

- 28.** If a consumer loses a gift voucher, the shop is not obliged to replace it.





**29.** If a shop closes down, those with gift vouchers become unsecured creditors and will find it very hard to get the voucher honoured – this is why it is best to give gift vouchers that can be used in a number of shops.

**30.** Gift cards, as distinct from gift vouchers, are insured and therefore are not a loss to the consumer in the event of a failure of the business - always assuming that the policy is fully paid up.

**31.** The same consumer rights apply to goods bought on sale or at a discount as to goods bought at full price – so if a good bought at a discount is faulty you are entitled to a repair, replacement or refund.



**32.** If you were made aware of a fault at the time of purchase and agreed to buy the discounted item anyway, you will not be able to claim a replacement or refund on the basis that that same fault is present.

**33.** Retailers cannot advertise a good as being on sale or special offer if it has not been previously offered at a higher price for a set period.

**34.** By paying a deposit, a consumer has entered into a contract with the retailer or seller and agreed to buy the product or service specified.

**35.** A seller is not required to return a deposit simply because the consumer has had a change of heart.

**36.** If a seller does not stick to the terms of the contract, the consumer has the right to get the deposit returned.

**37.** Where the terms of a contract are agreed on the premises of the seller (for example, a car sale) but the deposit is the final element and is paid by phone or email, then the 14-day cooling off period is applicable to the

contract.

**38.** A contract that has been agreed verbally is enforceable – but getting details in writing makes it easier to resolve an issue should a problem arise.

**39.** Service providers - and, specifically, tradespeople - must use goods of merchantable quality in the provision of the service/work/contract.

**40.** Installers of home alarm systems MUST be legally registered - otherwise, they fail both statutory and legal and insurance requirements.

**41.** Installers of all gas and electrical work/ systems – for example, gas boiler units - MUST be legally registered and MUST provide the consumer with a certificate for the work carried out.

**42.** Where a service provider advises an increase in rate or tariff of the currently contracted service/package/bundle, then the consumer is entitled to cancel their contract without penalty. The consumer must be advised of this by the provider.

**43.** If you fail to resolve an issue with a retailer or business and the money in dispute is less than €2,000, you can look to the Small Claims procedure, which is designed to handle consumer complaints quickly, inexpensively and without the need for a solicitor.

**44.** It costs €25 to lodge an application with the Small Claims Registrar.

**45.** Section 14 of the Sale of Goods & Supply of Services Act 1980 provides how, in the specific case of a credit card purchase, the financial provider is jointly liable with the retailer to resolve a dispute regarding the sale.



**46.** When you pay by credit card and subsequently have a dispute with the seller – for example, the goods you ordered were never delivered and the seller is refusing to issue a refund – you can ask your card provider to reverse the transaction in a process known as a chargeback.

**47.** A food safety issue should be reported to the Food Safety Authority of Ireland.

**48.** Consumers who find they cannot resolve a cross-border complaint with a trader based in another EU country can seek free advice from the European Consumer Centre Ireland.

**49.** Consumers who have failed to resolve a problem with their phone or broadband service provider can lodge a complaint with the Commission for Communications Regulation (ComReg).



**50.** The Consumers' Association of Ireland (CAI) is the only truly independent CONSUMER organisation in the State. The CAI receives NO finance of any kind from any commercial source. The CAI relies - completely and entirely - on the subscriptions of its Members, the ordinary consumers of Ireland.



**Consumers'  
Association  
of Ireland**

# Dairingly Alternative

**While Irish milk is a staple that would be hard to replace, for those seeking an alternative, there are other options worth exploring.**



**REPORT by Atousa Motameni**

**At a glance**

- **Irish dairy identity**
- **The substitutes**
- **What to consider**

Ireland is synonymous with quality milk and dairy products. In 2015, Irish dairy farms produced 6.4 billion litres of milk and exported enough milk for over 52 million people worldwide. According to the Irish Co-Operative Organisation Society (ICOS), Kerrygold is the top brand of butter in Germany and top imported brand in the US. ICOS also celebrates the European Commission's Joint Research Centre's finding that Irish milk is the most carbon-efficient milk produced in Europe. It's clear that dairy is a central part of the Irish identity, and, as has been well documented, it confers a range of health benefits in a tasty package. This article isn't meant to turn you away from glorious Irish milk and butter, but there are those who have an intolerance or allergy to dairy produce and who need to find alternatives. In addition, there are others who simply like to mix it up a little in their diets and add a variety of tastes. So for the uninitiated – or the merely curious – here is a quick guide to the world of alternative milks.

## **Dairy facts**

Milk and dairy products are a rich source of protein, vitamins and minerals, including calcium, which is needed for the maintenance of healthy bones and teeth. As a result, milk is particularly important for growing children and teenagers and also for older adults. The Department of Health's Food Pyramid recommends three servings of milk, cheese or yoghurt each day as part of a healthy, balanced diet and, for those aged 9-18 years, this should increase to five portions a day. Dairy produce – especially full-fat cheese – can, of course, be high in saturated fat, so low-fat versions are encouraged.

However, not everyone can enjoy the benefits of milk products. As well as allergies to proteins in cow's milk – which tend to affect young infants and children, with most growing out of it by the time they are aged eight – there would appear to be a significant number of people worldwide who suffer from lactose intolerance. Incidence of lactose intolerance varies hugely across the globe, with very high incidence among South

American, African and Asian populations compared to much smaller percentages among Northern Europeans particularly. Lactose intolerance is caused when a person does not have an enzyme called lactase in their gut to help them break down the natural sugar (lactose) found in animal milk and dairy products, leading to symptoms that may include bloating and stomach pains. As awareness of food intolerances increases, there is an expanding range of products to offer alternatives. However, those avoiding dairy products for whatever reason need to keep in mind that they will need to replace the goodness that milk brings to their diet – and, in particular, they will need to ensure they are getting sufficient amounts of calcium. Many alternative milks now come fortified with calcium as well as such vitamins as vitamin D – which is important for encouraging the absorption of calcium from food – so they can provide many of the benefits of normal milk.

With a range of dairy substitutes on the market, you do not need to be



lactose intolerant to try out the different flavours and tastes on offer, and those looking to adopt a vegan diet or who simply do not like the taste of milk will appreciate the various alternatives that can be sourced increasingly easily.

### The substitutes

One of the main reasons people grimace at the word vegan is the thought of having to endure the stomach-churning gurgles after having a seemingly harmless glass of soya milk - but this will not necessarily be the case and there are many other alternatives to dairy such as nut-based milks, coconut milk, rice milk, and oat milk.

### Soya milk

This is the most obvious alternative simply because it's the most common and well-known. It is a low-fat option that incorporates high-quality protein and offers countless health benefits, which is why soya is the most popular milk substitute. The Harvard School of Public Health lists lowering cholesterol, calming hot flashing, warding off some cancers and aiding weight loss among the main reasons for adopting soya in your diet. According to Harvard's School of Public Health, these benefits can be attributed to the large amount of isoflavones, which is described as a plant-made oestrogen. So if you are looking to make a healthy start to the New Year, adding soya to your food repertoire could be a smart choice. Complaints about soya milk have tended to surround the taste and texture of the milk. Companies have tried to remedy this by offering different flavours such as chocolate, strawberry or vanilla. Those looking to avoid extra calories, however, should opt for sugar-free or unsweetened versions.

### Nut-based milks

These milks include almond, hazelnut and other nut varieties and there are many health benefits to nuts that translate over to the milk. Research has found that almonds have a heart-protecting compound referred to as flavonoids and are high in vitamin E, while hazelnuts have been accredited as being a good source of folate. Many people seem to find the taste of these milks more tolerable if you like the taste of the nut by itself. Almond milks are generally low in saturated fats, calories and carbohydrates and these nut-based substitutes are a good option if you already use a hazelnut creamer in your coffee or would consider a switch to

almond milk for your Frosties! However, you will need to ensure you are getting adequate amounts of protein and calcium from other sources or look for fortified nut milks to make sure that you are not missing out.



### Coconut milk

There are myriad health benefits associated with coconut milk, which has been found to be high in such vitamins as C, E, B1, B3, B5, and B6 as well as offering a source of minerals including iron, selenium, sodium, calcium, magnesium and phosphorus. Many people already use coconut milk in their shampoos and lotions due to its pleasant fragrance, but some of those silky smooth qualities can be passed onto the milk, which has a creamy texture not unlike cow's milk! However, it is relatively high in fat and does not provide the same nutritional benefits. Nonetheless, it is a good alternative, along with the other options, for those with lactose intolerance, and it's also popular as a base for milkshakes, smoothies, and baked goods.

### Rice milk

Made from boiled rice, brown rice syrup and brown rice starch, rice milk is the most hypoallergenic of the milk alternatives as it is free from soya, gluten, nuts and, of course, lactose - making it a good choice for those who are allergic or cannot tolerate these ingredients. However, rice milk is high in carbohydrates, while being low in protein and calcium compared to dairy milk. This milk is also thin and watery, so it is not a good cow's milk substitute for cooking or baking.

Moreover, some rice milk brands contain thickening agents, sugar and flavourings, so look at the label before buying.

### Oat milk

Made from oats and water, with sometimes the addition of other grains and beans, oat milk is an excellent source of calcium, vitamin D, riboflavin and fibre. However, those watching the waistline should be aware that oat milk tends to be higher in calories.

### Irish alternatives

Maintaining diets of any kind can be difficult, but without completely abstaining from the undeniable deliciousness of Irish milk and butter, you can still incorporate these varying tastes into your diet to reap the countless benefits. Given the retail prices compared with cow's milk, these alternatives may be something of a luxury, with non-dairy milks coming in at twice or three times the cost of the traditional product. It is positive, nonetheless, that these alternative products are becoming more accessible, and as well as such brands as Alpro, Oatly, Rice Dream, Koko Dairy-Free and Blue Diamond Almonds, some retailers are also offering own-brand non-dairy milks. Your health is worth investing time and effort into, so if you are considering a major move to alternative milks, be sure to do your homework and avoid missing out on the benefits that dairy products bring to a balanced diet.





# Fuel-efficient cars to bring significant consumer benefits



REPORT by Clodagh O'Donoghue

**Fuel-efficient cars are set to become much more affordable to consumers in the future and there will be significant financial savings to be reaped due to lower running costs, according to a recent study.**

A new study, commissioned by the European Consumer Organisation, BEUC, and released on 28th November 2016, has found that owning and running a fuel-efficient car should become much more affordable between 2020 and 2030 compared with today, provided new technologies are brought to the market.

Conducted by consultancy Element Energy, the study explored what type of consumer impacts could be expected from the introduction of lower carbon and fuel saving technologies in the period between 2020 and 2030 and the implications of the adoption of new EU passenger car CO<sub>2</sub> and fuel efficiency targets in terms of delivering lower emissions vehicles into the 2020s. The European Commission is expected to propose such targets in 2017. By 2050, the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions generated by the European transport sector will have to be 60% below 1990 levels and achieving these major reductions will require substantial technological improvements in passenger cars over the coming years, which will in turn mean changes in the cost of owning and using a vehicle.

Among the key findings of the study are the following:

- Between 2020 and 2030, driving cars that are more fuel and energy efficient will help reduce the cost of driving for motoring consumers. This is the case whether the motorist is driving a conventional combustion powered car or an alternatively powered car, such as an electric vehicle.
- The purchase price of ultra-low-carbon electric cars will drop significantly, making these vehicles available to a wider number of people, and they will be highly

competitive if not cheaper to run than conventional cars. By 2024, the average four-year total cost of an electric vehicle - including purchase price and running costs - should match, if not be lower than, a petrol car.

- There is a strong potential to improve the fuel economy of petrol and diesel cars at a low cost – over the lifetime of a petrol or diesel car bought in 2025 compared to one purchased in 2015, consumers could save on average between €4,400 and €9,400.

- Although there are clear financial benefits for consumers who buy brand new fuel-efficient vehicles, those who buy second-hand or third-hand cars will benefit the most from lower fuel costs while only paying a fraction towards the manufacturing costs due to vehicle depreciation. In addition, because used car owners are generally in lower income groups than owners of new cars, they will therefore feel more acutely the benefits of lower costs.

Thus, consumers are set to enjoy significant benefits from a move towards greater fuel efficiency in vehicles. As Monique Goyens, Director General of BEUC, has commented, "Consumers stand to win big from the costs savings of energy efficient technologies, whatever type of car they choose to ride." Ms Goyens further noted that "Today's cars consume much more than manufacturers claim they do. It is high time cars became a money saver instead of a money drainer. However, the change will not happen by itself, policy makers need to lock in the technology roll out."

This remark echoes a finding in the study on what policy makers need

to deliver in order to make this more cost-effective motoring future a reality. As the study highlights, decision makers must ensure that the car industry is incentivised and given certainty by way of setting clear rules and regulations in terms of binding EU CO<sub>2</sub> reduction targets. Such targets are essential for incentivising the deployment of fuel efficient technologies. Policy makers at every level also need to recognise that passenger car decarbonisation strategies can also reduce air pollution and this, in turn, can help to safeguard human health.

The study acknowledges that, from a practical standpoint, more electric cars on the road means that further action is required on the deployment of charging infrastructure, with more charging points needed on major roads. According to Ms Goyens, "Consumers need certainty that refuelling will be convenient and accessible whether they want to charge at home, at work, or whilst on the road." In addition, the problem of home charging where off-street parking is not available and the need to ensure convenient access and payment options for charging between cities and countries will have to be addressed. A greater understanding of battery durability and its impact on the used electric vehicle market will also be needed.

The study concludes by pointing out that its aim was to explore the cost of low emissions technologies and so it has not factored in other associated costs that could affect the vehicles market. Thus, the costs presented by the study must be viewed in terms of indicating the potential of low emissions technologies rather than being taken as a prediction of the cost of passenger cars in coming years. Nonetheless, a greener and more cost-efficient outlook for motoring consumers is a welcome vision of the future.





# Internet-Connected Toys – Not Child's Play

**European consumer associations are highlighting the shortcomings of two internet-connected toys that raise safety and privacy concerns and breach the rights of the youngest consumers.**



**REPORT by Clodagh O'Donoghue**

## At a glance

- **Two internet-connected toys tested**
- **Security concerns**
- **Privacy issues**

The 'internet of things' (IoT) is a term used to describe the current and rapidly growing trend of attaching sensors to a wide range of devices and appliances to make them 'smart'. From fridges that can tell you when you are out of milk to toothbrushes that let you know when you have missed a spot to thermostats that will monitor weather forecasts and adjust your home heating accordingly, all manner of innovations are emerging, with the professed aims of making our lives ever easier, more streamlined, more time and cost effective, more energy efficient, more comfortable....the list of touted benefits goes on. Thanks to their internet-related functions, these devices can communicate with each other and often data is transferred to third parties for analytical and other purposes. With the multiple new opportunities that arise, so do many potential areas of concern. With a wide range of devices recording and collecting vast amounts of data, questions need to be answered in relation to who has access to this information, how might it be used, are sufficient security measures being taken and how zealously are consumers' rights being protected.

Now the internet of things is

branching out, targeting ever-younger consumers and spawning a subsection we could term the 'internet of toys'. A number of products are already being marketed as 'interactive', using an internet connection and companion app to dazzle and delight their young target market. However, a closer look at such playthings is warranted given the vulnerability of this consumer group. Forbrukerrådet, the Norwegian Consumer Council (NCC), as part of a campaign looking at aspects of the IoT marketplace, has focussed its attentions on a number of internet-connected toys currently available and found serious issues in relation to security, privacy and consumer rights.

## The toys

The NCC's investigation focussed on three products – two dolls, My Friend Cayla and Hello Barbie, and a robot toy, i-Que. Because Hello Barbie is only available in the US at present, the NCC's current action is concentrated on the other two offerings, which have widespread European availability. In terms of the Irish market, My Friend Cayla appears to be largely available only through online retailers while i-Que is also on sale in some shops.

The toys are made by the same manufacturer, Genesis Toys, and use a microphone and speech-recognition technology coupled with an internet connection and companion app to have 'conversations' with their small owners, with the recommended age being four years and older. The toy connects to the relevant app on a mobile phone or tablet through Bluetooth and the apps can access Wikipedia and some other websites to answer questions posed by the child. Both products come with pre-programmed statements and sentences to simulate a conversation and any phrases or words that have been deemed 'inappropriate' are filtered out.

## Security issues

The NCC's investigation into these products uncovered issues in a number of areas that give rise to concern. A key aspect that the organisation is keen to highlight is the lack of security provided on these toys. Cayla and i-Que use no security measures when pairing to a mobile phone or tablet so, once the toys are switched on and have not been connected to another device, they can be found and connected to any Bluetooth device within range. Given that their names

when searching for Bluetooth devices are 'Top Toy Cayla' and 'I'QUE', they are easily recognisable. Thus, testers found that, with little technical know-how required, it was possible for anyone to take control of these toys through a phone or tablet and they would then be able to use the toy as a listening device or communicate through it with the child without having any physical access to it. Testers further found that it was possible to pair with these toys at a distance of 20 metres in open spaces and also through double-glazed windows and concrete walls, albeit at a reduced range.

The vulnerability of the Cayla doll to being essentially hacked by a third party was, in fact, highlighted by the BBC in the UK last year but the recent tests show that this security deficiency has not been rectified. It could, however, be quite easily fixed by ensuring that a person needs to have physical access to the toy before being able to connect to it. This could be by means of a physical button on the toy that must be pressed during pairing with the mobile device or by requiring the user to enter a password, which would have the added advantage of ensuring that the physical button is not accidentally activated.

### Terms and conditions

The NCC investigation also looked closely at the terms and conditions and privacy policies attached to the Cayla and i-Que products – which, because they come from the same manufacturer, are almost identical. Before using the toy, users have to consent to the T&Cs, scrutiny of which revealed a number of points of concern, including the fact that the company says it can change the terms without giving users notice. In stating that its privacy policy may be updated from time to time, the company suggests that users check its website regularly – implying that they may need to read through a lengthy legal document every time they

want to play with the doll to see if they are still happy with the policy terms. Users also must consent to the fact that their personal data can be used for targeted advertising and that information may be shared for whatever purpose with unnamed third parties. Moreover, it is not clear how long the data collected will be retained and the company says that it can shut down its service without notice and that it "reserves the right to limit and terminate" access to any of its services, including that of the app, without notice. Many of these terms and conditions are, in the NCC's view, in breach of the EU Unfair Contract Terms Directive and the EU Data Protection Directive.

### Other concerns

The Cayla and i-Que toys are likely to be viewed as trusted friends by their young owners but, in fact, any secrets and information that the child imparts are transferred to US-based company Nuance Communications, which provides speech-to-text services for the products and receives voice data from their companion apps. This firm reserves the right to share this information with third parties and it can use the speech data gathered for a broad variety of purposes, such as developing unrelated services and products.

Parents should also be aware that there is a level of hidden marketing with these products. The toys are embedded with pre-programmed phrases where they endorse different commercial products, thus constituting a product placement directed to children playing with the toy. For example, Cayla will make reference to how much she enjoys different Disney films and meanwhile, the app provider, ToyQuest, has a commercial relationship with Disney.

### Action taken

These problems are not confined to the products discussed here but are emblematic

of the spread of connected devices generally. With connected devices set to proliferate in coming years, the NCC's head of digital services Finn Myrstad comments that "In a growing market, it is essential that consumers, and especially children, are not being used as subjects for products that have not been sufficiently tested." As manufacturers and service providers enter uncharted waters in the digital arena, they need to be mindful of the security and privacy risks that are created.

On 6th December 2016, the NCC made public its research and, in a coordinated action, consumer associations from across Europe highlighted the findings on websites, through social media and in their publications as well as sending letters to their national consumer and data protection agencies. For its part, the Consumers' Association of Ireland has notified the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission and the Office of the Data Protection Commissioner, bringing these important consumer and child safety issues to their attention. As internet-connected devices gain momentum, market supervision will become increasingly complex and responding to the significant challenge of making sure that EU consumers are properly protected will require co-operation between authorities and consumer organisations.

Coinciding with the action in Europe, a major complaint was filed in the US to the Federal Trade Commission by the Electronic Privacy Information Centre, the Campaign for a Commercial Free Childhood, the Centre for Digital Democracy and Consumers Union.

Children are entitled to products and services that safeguard their rights to security and privacy, and, as Mr Myrstad notes, as long as the manufacturers are not willing to take these issues seriously, IoT technologies are not suitable for toys.

## WHAT SHOULD CONSUMERS DO?

1. Given the lack of security and privacy protection in these toys, consumer associations across Europe are recommending that consumers think twice before buying them for their children.
2. If you have already bought one of these toys, you can try to complain and return it to the shop on the grounds that it is contended that it is not safe to use because it does not meet consumer and data protection standards. If the toy was bought online, you have the right to cancel the purchase within 14 days.
3. If you want to keep the toy, remember to switch it off when not in use. In this way, you can have control over who can connect to the toy, although it does not solve the other issues. Also keep in mind that your child might turn on the toy again, leaving the device vulnerable.
4. For more information, consumers can visit <http://www.forbrukerradet.no/siste-nytt/connected-toys-violate-consumer-laws> or view the #toyfail video outlining the toys' shortcomings on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IAOj0H5c6Yc&feature=youtu.be>.



# Considering Consumer Culture

**Consumer Choice** looks at today's throwaway consumer culture. What are we supporting when we shop?



REPORT by *Róisín Moloney Weekes*

At a glance

- Excessive shopping
- Quality available
- This time next year

Christmas celebrations and New Year clear-outs demonstrate to us just how much we consume. Overflowing play rooms and bulging wardrobes are a reminder of the excesses that have become our norm. Unopened food and toys that have no use; once-worn clothes that find their way to the recycle bin together with the curtains that were just not quite right; and that juicer, that bread maker and the yoga mat that all turned out to be aspirational. How many damaged bicycles and appliances lie idly in garages and in the corners of spare rooms, unfixed and eventually dumped when a new replacement is more convenient and maybe even cheaper?

## Quantity, not quality

Times of recession and austerity seem to have increased the volume of 'stuff' we consume rather than curb it. The difference appears to be that the quality and price of what we consume is part of a spiraling race to the bottom. Retailers in our towns and cities and shopping

centres are increasingly those that offer low-priced, low-quality, mass-produced products that can be described very often as disposable. Clothes that are the worse for wear after a couple of washes. Raincoats that are not waterproof and winter coats that won't keep you warm. Synthetic fabrics that don't look or feel good. Kitchen gadgets that don't work or break easily - how often do these type of products sustain the test of time in our kitchens? Are they useful and durable enough? No matter how cheap they are to buy, if they don't work they are a waste of money.

With this increased availability of poor quality, cheap products, consumers' choices have tended to shift to a short-term focus, the consequences of which are far-reaching. Firstly, there is the impact on our environment, which must deal with the excesses of waste, the volume of which is unprecedented. The ethical implications of how such products are made must be

considered and how they can be sold at such low prices. The hit must be absorbed at some step in the chain of production and, in many cases, it is absorbed by workers in developing countries being exploited.

The functionality of such products is often questionable with poor quality and durability often a problem. The time and money wasted shopping for, purchasing and disposing of such products is frustrating. It may be argued that this style of shopping is liked by fashionistas and trend followers but what is good fashion? According to iconic designer Vivienne Westwood, when it comes to fashion people should "buy less, choose well. Make it last. Quality, not quantity. Everybody's buying far too many clothes."

Perhaps it is time for reflection on our choices as consumers with the power to change by demanding something better.

## Possible solutions

In an attempt to reduce greenhouse gas emissions through a change in consumer culture, Sweden has proposed introducing tax breaks on repairs to clothes, bicycles, fridges and washing machines. On bikes and clothes, VAT would be reduced from 25% to 12% and, on white goods, consumers would be able to claim back income tax due on the labour cost of the person doing the work. The incentives are intended to reduce the environmental impact of the things that Swedes buy. With ambitious targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, Sweden found that the impact of consumers' choices is actually increasing emissions and needed to be tackled. It is estimated that this scheme will cost approximately €50 million in lost taxes – however, it is argued that this will be more than outweighed by income from a new tax on harmful chemicals in white goods.



It is believed that this nudge towards better consumer choices will result in the creation of jobs for skilled manual workers and reduce the environmental impact of such everyday choices. For example, many homes have a bike in need of repair, which, if left unfixed, will cause the use of other forms of transportation and may in time result in increased rubbish. Tax incentives for repair shops will expand the number of such services, making it easier and more convenient for consumers to have repairs done. Some may argue that

there is a possibility that people buying less would have a negative impact on the economy – however, it is anticipated that this incentive will not make people avoid buying things overall but rather make it easier for people to buy high quality products because they know it is affordable to have them fixed if something breaks. So it is a lessened incentive to buy as cheap as possible and then scrap. As repairs are more labour intensive than production, which has largely been automated, expanding repairs could actually contribute to an expanding labour market and a decrease in unemployment. It would also boost the local labour market since repairs would be done locally, as opposed to manufacturing, which occurs in centralised locations, often overseas.

We are all becoming more and more aware of the environmental effects of consumption at a global and national level but also at an individual level. This is reflected in the increase in environmentally labelled products and the sustainable use of products. When made aware consumers are increasingly concerned about our environment and are increasingly active in becoming part of the solution. This is demonstrated by the great increases in fair trade products. The growth of the shared economy and all the benefits that come with it is an indication that an alternative way of consuming is on the rise.

## A better way forward

Cast an eye towards the bulging bins this Christmas and New Year and don't tell me that it generates a good feeling. Reflection may lead you towards a New Year's resolution in the form of more considered consumption. Each purchase could be questioned on its merits reflecting quality, origin, durability and life span. This style of consuming would increase the value you get for your money in the long term. We could also teach the next generation a better form of consumption while also being part of the solution to so many problems caused by the excesses of consumerism in our world, both locally and globally. If that's not enough, such an approach may offer the added benefit of a more stylish you wearing homegrown fabrics in handmade garments while you change the world for the better.

Perhaps you could end 2017 with a less cluttered house, with more money

in your pocket, with substantially less rubbish bags at the New Year clear-out containing no unopened food or once-worn clothes. If you can paint this picture then imagine how it would feel to be a consumer in control of your hard-earned money, demanding better quality, opting out of the excesses and the machine that pushes the idea that you need more and more. Don't tell me that this feeling can't beat the feeling of retail therapy any day. Perhaps abstinence from mindless shopping will do more for our stress levels and mental health than retail therapy. If shopping is a pastime that you enjoy, then perhaps browsing and searching for your perfect fit can replace it. Seeking out independent retailers, designers and crafts people can be extremely satisfying when you find just what you were looking for. Knowing where the product is made, by whom and with what materials are likely to inform your decision before making any purchase. How will the product be cared for and is it fit for the purpose you intend it? As consumers, we sometimes need to be reminded that collectively we hold the power and we can bring about change by demanding something better.





# Childcare options and costs

**Consumer Choice** investigates what parents face when it comes to the childcare options available and the financial costs attached.



REPORT by *Róisín Moloney Weekes*

At a glance

- **Preschool options**
- **In-home care**
- **Supports**

In today's society, many new parents will agree that childcare is a major priority. No sooner has a working parent named their new arrival than they begin to worry about childcare. Childcare considerations are so important these days that it can be the rationale for having less or no children. With the costs of mortgages, insurance, transport, and education, it is very often the case that both parents are required to work outside the home. Some parents may choose to work and continue to build their career, and why not? The simple formula of father is bread winner and mother is homemaker is not the norm for many

families and alternative arrangements are required.

Deciding on childcare is a tricky decision for any parent. Many factors must be taken into account, such as how many hours you will require, the age and needs of your child, what is available in your location and, of course, your budget.

## Preschool options

Sessional services offer a planned programme consisting of 3.5 hours per day, usually for children aged three to five years old. Options can be distinguished by their curriculum of education or their

management structures. In order to provide a sessional childcare service, a recognised childcare qualification is required. Sessional services include Montessori groups that focus on individualised education, teaching social skills and maximising children's development. Montessori groups cater for children up to six years old. Naíonraí are nursery schools operating through Irish. Playschools give children an opportunity to play with other children of a similar age, learn to share and take turns and understand the rules of the classroom, such as listening.

The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme provides early childhood care and education for children of preschool age. From September 2016, children are eligible for the ECCE scheme if they are aged three years and not older than five and a half years. Children can now enroll in preschool at three different points - September, January, and April - in the school year in order to access the scheme.

The pattern of hours of free preschool education depends on the type of service that your child attends and the weekly model that the service operates. For example, if your child attends a sessional service, the normal pattern for the free preschool year is three hours a day, five days a week over the school year. If your child attends for more than three hours you will be charged for the extra time. Demand for places in such facilities is generally high, so get your child's name on the waiting list of any prospective facilities as soon as possible.

### Other options

For other children that are not preschool age, there are various options such as childminders, nannies, and au pairs as well as crèche facilities, the fees for which vary according to your location. According to eumom.ie, Dublin and Cork city and suburbs are on par when it comes to childcare costs; the Midlands, on the other hand, appear to be least expensive.

A childminder is a person who looks after children in their own home independently. Childminders are subject to guidelines that must be met regarding ratios. They can mind up to eight children to include their own children but this number decreases to five when minding preschool children. There should be no more than two toddlers or babies under 15 months with one childminder.

A guideline on rates in cities estimates that full-time childminders charge approximately €5-€6.50 per hour or a daily rate of €50 for one child. A part-time or after-school service to include school collection costs approximately €5-€6.50 per hour or €25 per day. For a second child, most childminders offer a discount, bringing the hourly rate to €8. The price may also be affected by whether or not food is provided. Some childminders charge minimum wage, which is €9.25 an hour from January 2017. Childminders are usually paid 52 weeks of the year and for bank holidays unless there is an extended break, such as for the duration of the

summer. Childminders are self employed and therefore responsible for paying their own taxes. In other parts of the country, childminders' rates can be slightly less. A full-time rate of €5 per hour is common but a set daily rate of €40 for one child is more likely. Part-time or after-school care including collections can cost €5 per hour or €15-€20 daily. Sibling discounts for two children are generally €7-€7.50 per hour.

### In-home childcare

An alternative option is to have your child or children cared for in your own home by hiring a nanny or an au pair. A nanny will become your employee if he/she comes to your home to work and so you will become an employer and you must pay all the relevant tax and social contributions. A full-time nanny generally works Monday to Friday, 8am to 6pm. Any additional babysitting or overtime is not included in their weekly wage. Rates of pay will vary depending on the nanny's experience, the number of children to be cared for, the nanny's qualifications and the location.

In cities such as Dublin, Cork and Galway, a nanny working full time can expect €10-€12 per hour or €500-€600 gross per week. If they work part-time, they can expect €12-€15 per hour or €280-€375 per week for approximately 22 hours. Nannies are also paid 52 weeks per year and are entitled to statutory holidays. Other parts of the country are often slightly less expensive, with full-time nannies being paid in the region of €9.15-€10 per hour or €400-€480 per week or €10 per hour for part-time work.

Another option for both urban and rural families is to engage an au pair. This solution is ideal if you only require up to 35 hours of babysitting per week and have the room to accommodate an adult in your home. An au pair has traditionally been paid pocket money and given free bed and board in return for babysitting and some light housework. This payment varies in amount depending on location. In Dublin, a full-time, live-in au pair working 25-35 hours per week receives between €115 and €150 per week. In Cork and Galway, this payment decreases to €100-€149 and, in other parts of the country, it decreases further to €80-€100 per week. Live-out au pairs are employees and should be paid €9.15 per hour and this should increase to €9.25 per hour from January 2017.

### Supports

Budget 2017 has introduced some

childcare support but a limited number of families will benefit. A new Single Affordable Childcare Scheme has been introduced to reduce the costs of centre-based childcare for parents, with subsidies targeted at those earning less. It will come into effect in September 2017 and the fine details are yet to be worked out. It appears, however, that a limited number of families will benefit from the initiative since carers will be required to be registered with Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. With only 1% of childminders choosing to register as opposed to all childcare centres being required to register, many families who use the help of relatives, nannies or au pairs to care for their child or children will not benefit.

While this scheme is a welcome addition to the limited support offered to working parents, it is not enough. This is an important area of investment for individual families and for our society as a whole and it appears that an overhaul of the cost and quality of childcare in Ireland is required to remove us from being at top of the list for childcare costs in OECD countries.







# Mobile Contract Commitments

**Consumer Choice** compiles top tips every consumer should be armed with before entering into a mobile phone contract.



REPORT by *Róisín Moloney Weekes*

At a glance

- Entering a contract
- Ending a contract
- 'Unlimited' packages

With over 70% of Ireland's population using smartphones, more and more of us are becoming susceptible to the lure of the latest phone model and its newest features. With phones now available on every main street and shopping centre, it becomes increasingly easier for consumers to find themselves entering contracts for service without always knowing the consequences. It can be as easy as producing photo identification and a utility bill, some form filling and ten minutes later you leave the shop with that expensive iPhone without having handed over a bob. A smartphone that could cost hundreds of euro could be yours today for free. Signing into such contracts has become so informal that consumers may not always give this legal contract the required consideration despite the fact that it can last up to two years and amount to a significant sum of money. Realising that you are entitled to that platinum or gold upgrade may be so thrilling that it can be very difficult to resist and committing to a further long contract may seem secondary at the time. The current offer may be just too hard to pass up but keep in

mind that we as individual customers are dealing with big business and offers such as upgrades and promotions are always carefully designed nudges in a direction that favours the designer.

Before signing your life away, or at least a portion of your monthly income for one to two years, you should at a very minimum calculate the total amount you will pay over the duration of the contract term. You could as an alternative consider purchasing the handset outright, which will without doubt be better value than committing to a long term and very often expensive contract. If you cannot afford to purchase the phone outright, perhaps you could consider a cheaper model and maybe enter a Sim-only deal with the provider.

## Entering a contract

Many consumers are not aware that there are various ways in which you can enter a contract. Firstly, you can enter a contract by agreeing over the phone where the conversation is recorded and without having signed any forms or other documents. In such a scenario a sales agent

will discuss the service with the customer and this is the time to ask as many questions as necessary to understand fully what is being entered into. Secondly, a customer can enter a contract by signing a customer authorisation form. This is the traditional way of entering into an agreement. Once signed, you make a binding contract with the service provider. Customers must ask themselves if they are satisfied that they fully understand the contract and the service before signing. Thirdly and finally, a consumer can enter a contract by filling in an online version of the customer authorisation form. This is usually found on the service provider's website and once completed creates a binding contract also. Customers should record the details entered into such forms as well as the terms of the contract generated from it.

## Contract considerations

When entering into a contract, take the time to understand what you will be paying for each month. What is included in your package? Do you use all that it offers or can a more suitable package meet



your needs more accurately? Analysing what you need in terms of call minutes, text messages, data, roaming and so on can make an enormous difference as the correct package will ensure that your monthly bill does not exceed the tariff you have agreed to pay. Customers must get this right from the start because to change while in contract can mean further expense, an increased price or a fresh contract tying you in for longer. There are often additional features included in packages that drive up prices. Consumers should ask what features are included in a package and question whether or not they will be of any use to you. The mobile phone market is competitive and market players will fight to keep their customers. Keep this in mind when you negotiate your new deal.

As with all contracts entered, but particularly with contracts of long duration, consumers should be informed and should read through the terms and conditions. Companies may make this difficult by making them long winded and using small fonts. No doubt the terms and conditions will be extremely boring and perhaps you will feel rushed because of a queue building behind you. However, you need to persevere and be informed as to what you are signing up to. If you enter the contract online or over the phone, remember that you are entitled to a 14-day cooling off period to cancel your agreement. If you choose to use this and you decide to cancel the contract, do so in writing within 14 days to avoid a cancellation fee.

If a situation arises where you choose to cancel your contract in circumstances where it was penalty free to do so, it is crucial that you cancel the contract by the means prescribed by the network - for example, in writing. Customers have complained that their instructions to cancel a contract given verbally over the phone were not heeded as their provider requires such requests to be in writing – such a situation usually results in added expense for the consumer.

If the customer chooses to cancel the contract before the contract has expired - perhaps because it is no longer affordable, the customer is moving abroad or maybe a better offer is now on the market - in such circumstances a cancellation fee will generally apply. It is important to know how much this fee will be and it can often be higher than if the phone had been purchased outright in the

first place.

The Commission for Communications Regulation (ComReg) is the regulator for this industry and if you have difficulty with your service provider it is to this body you can turn. Consumers who wish to make a complaint first need to contact their service provider and allow ten working days for the service provider to respond to the complaint. If a consumer is not satisfied with the response, ComReg can raise the issue with the service provider on a consumer's behalf.

### 'Unlimited' packages

All consumers should know when they sign up to a package that includes a description of 'unlimited' that this may not actually mean unlimited. ComReg reports that a number of phone and Internet packages are described as 'unlimited'. In this context, the word unlimited would normally be taken to mean that consumers, having agreed to pay a set price, may make as many calls or spend as much time online as they wish. However, some service contracts qualify the meaning of unlimited by stating that it is subject to an 'acceptable' or 'fair' level of use by the consumer. This is sometimes referred to as a 'fair usage policy'.

ComReg advises that any contract that sets usage thresholds, or describes what constitutes 'fair' or 'acceptable' use, should be clear and unambiguous, particularly where the service is described as being unlimited.



Usage thresholds or limits should be clearly set out, as should the manner in which they are updated or amended. Service providers should have a clear and transparent policy for dealing with customer usage above any set thresholds. The policy should set out the rules for contract termination, including penalties, the charges that shall apply for any use above the threshold/limit, and the policy regarding migration of the customer to other packages, if applicable.

Again, consumers should carefully read the terms and conditions of a contract and be aware of the particular limits or thresholds that apply before purchasing.

A complaint about the advertisement of 'unlimited' downloads while operating a fair usage policy should be raised with the Advertising Standards Authority for Ireland by the consumer. Complaints about contractual terms and conditions setting out a fair usage policy without specific usage limits can be raised with ComReg by the consumer.

### Useful contacts

#### Commission for Communications Regulation

tel 01 8049668  
www.comreg.ie

#### Advertising Standards Authority for Ireland

tel 01 6137040  
www.asai.ie



# Robot Vacuum Cleaners

**Robot vacuum cleaners – do they get the job done or do they suck (and not in a good way)?**



REPORT by Clodagh O'Donoghue

At a glance

- Features to look for
- One Choice Buy

If someone in your life hates vacuuming more than anything, the perfect present is now available. You will really need to love the individual in question, however, given the humungous price tag attached to these machines. And having handed over hundreds of euro to free your loved one from the tedious chore of vacuuming, will they be satisfied with the results?

## An evolving category

Automated robotic vacuum cleaners have been on the market for some years. The notion of a machine that will take over the chore of getting your floors dust and dirt free without anyone having to drag a vacuum cleaner around is undoubtedly appealing and manufacturers have been working to get the technology right to cater to the market that certainly exists for these devices. However, if robot vacuum cleaners are to move beyond the novelty factor, they must be able to perform the most basic requirement of getting floors thoroughly clean. And though it is impressive that they can manoeuvre around a home, getting to tricky-to-reach areas like under beds and other furniture, if they have to be rescued and liberated on a regular basis from behind obstacles or untangled from extension cords, it rather defeats the purpose of investing in an automated device that will allow you to put your feet up. Not only that, but the device

needs to be able to get to the edges of rooms and into corners or else the job will be left only half done.

The technology has become increasingly sophisticated with the artificial intelligence of these machines now capable of mapping a course around your home to ensure complete coverage, using sensors to avoid or circumvent obstacles all while removing dust and dirt where needed. The level of suction that these machines can generate has also increased, allowing for greater dirt and dust removal and some newer machines can effectively eliminate pet hair. It has been the case, though, that machines that do a fantastic job of navigating your floor space efficiently have not produced impressive cleaning results, whereas some devices that excel at dirt and dust removal have found negotiating their way around a home more problematic. The key for manufacturers is to produce a machine that is clever enough and powerful enough to conquer both navigation and cleaning challenges.

Robot vacuum cleaners typically do a pretty good job on hard flooring, so those who live in minimalist one-level dwellings with little clutter, wide open-plan spaces and hardwood floors might find that a robot vacuum cleaner that can be programmed to get to work while everyone is out during the day is more than sufficient for their vacuuming needs. However, that is the reality for only a few and the rest



of us live in environments that present a rather more significant challenge for automated vacuum cleaners, with multiple levels, plenty of obstacles to navigate and a mixture of hard floors, rugs and carpets. Thus, it remains the case, that although some robot vacuum cleaners can now do a decent job of eliminating dust and even larger debris from your floors, you are unlikely to be able to throw out your trusty push-around vacuum cleaner. So you may be able to set your nifty robot to give the floors a surface clean that will make the place look spick and span, but to get deep into carpet pile and really pick up engrained dirt, you will likely need to combine this with a regular stint with a conventional vacuum cleaner.

### Features to look for

If, having weighed the potential upsides and downsides, you are in the market for a pricey present or are ready to make a substantial investment in your emancipation from the monotony of regular vacuuming, what should you look for in a robot vacuum cleaner?

### Sensors

Robot vacuum cleaners typically use various smart sensors to help them navigate around your home, with the most sophisticated offerings using laser-guided scanners or a mix of cameras and sensors to identify obstacles, walls and ledges and to map out a floor plan for cleaning purposes. Dirt sensors help to ensure that debris is picked up rather than left behind.

### Stair detection

A now-standard feature on most robot vacuum cleaners, ledge or cliff sensors ensure that the device can sense when it has reached a stair edge and can move back from it rather than suffering a potentially

damaging fall.

### Virtual wall

If you want to block off a particular room or area, a virtual wall or virtual guard accessory can project beams, creating an invisible barrier that a robot vacuum cleaner will not cross.

### Programmable times

It is useful if you can set the robot for certain times during the day or week so it can get to work while you are out of the house.

### Controls

Some robots come with a remote control that you can use for directing the course they take over your floors and newer versions offer an accompanying app for use with a smartphone or tablet.

### Capacity

Robots' neat size generally translates into a fairly small capacity for holding dust and it will certainly be a good deal less than the amount a conventional vacuum cleaner might accommodate. If you don't want to have to empty the robot too regularly, check the amount of dust the device will be able to store before buying.

### Size

You should check the height of the appliance itself to ensure that it will get under most of the furniture in your home, as some models are flatter than others. Bulkier versions might hold more dust but will they be able to venture under your couch or cabinets?

### Brush type

Robots need to deliver decent cleaning performance and those with turbo heads should be able to eliminate more dust and

dirt. Small rotating brushes on the side can help to direct debris into the path of the robot and result in a better overall finish.

### Bumps and thresholds

Robots vary in their ability to climb over door thresholds and onto rugs – generally they are able to deal with bumps that are around 1.6cm and some can handle up to 2cm, so you should check the height of your door thresholds if you are hoping that the device will be able to get multiple rooms done at once.

### Charging

Robots run on battery charge and often are able to automatically return to their docking station for recharging when power is running low – so you shouldn't find them stranded in the middle of the room with the job left half done as you might with machines that have to be plugged in to recharge.

### Noise

Robot vacuum cleaners are generally quieter than conventional push-around models, though owners have reported that the noise generated can be whiny and irritating. If you intend to set the robot to run while you are at work, noise may not be an issue, but if not, you might want to hear the device in operation in the shop before you buy.

For those who, on reflection, think they will stick with a conventional vacuum cleaner, *Consumer Choice* has seven great models to recommend in its November 2016 issue. Among robot vacuum cleaners, a relatively new entry from Dyson – a manufacturer that prides itself as being at the forefront of innovation – has achieved Choice Buy status.



## Dyson 360 Eye €1,000

### Carpets

★★★★★

### Hard flooring

★★★★★

### Coverage

★★★★★

### Obstacles

★★★★

### Ease of use

★★★★★

The *Choice Buy* Dyson 360 Eye performs extremely well at the basic task of getting floors clean, regardless of flooring type. Both carpets and hard flooring are left free from dust and debris, though pet hair removal is less impressive so pet owners might need to take this into account. The device makes use of its 360° Vision system to take 30 images a second and create a panoramic view of the room, which the manufacturer claims leads to more effective navigation and ultimately a more comprehensive clean. This robot does indeed deliver good coverage of floors and is decent at getting around obstacles. It also reliably returns to its charging base when finished or when the battery runs low and, with tank-style tracks instead of wheels, the Dyson 360 Eye can climb over ledges and thresholds of up to 2cm. You can control this appliance using either the button on the top of the robot or through an app for Android and iOS mobile devices that lets you remotely start, pause and stop the cleaning function or programme a one-off clean or recurring cleaning schedule. Currently only available online from the manufacturer's website, this device will cost a whopping €1,000, so it is quite an investment – and you will still need to keep your conventional vacuum cleaner on hand for more thorough cleaning sessions.



# Fridges

**We ask a lot of our fridges at Christmas time – here are four Choice Buys that are more than up to the task.**



**REPORT** by Clodagh O'Donoghue

#### At a glance

- Safe storage for festive food
- Four Choice Buys

We are dependent on our fridges as an essential household appliance all year round but never more so than at Christmas time. Rightly or wrongly, many of us spend significant sums buying quantities of festive fare and then rely on our fridges to keep much of this food safe to eat. It is paramount that poultry, meat and fish items are stored at the correct temperature, not to mention other items like coleslaws, patés, dips, salads and so on. And having bought so much, there will inevitably be leftovers – which again must be chilled quickly and stored properly. Fridges need to be able to cool everything down to a safe temperature fast, locking in as many nutrients as possible and preventing the growth of harmful bacteria. It is handy if the appliance has a 'supercool' function that will provide an added blast of cold to get the job done even faster when required – for example, when adding a large batch of fresh food straight from the supermarket. Having chilled everything down, a fridge then needs to reliably maintain stable temperatures, no matter how much the surrounding room

heats up - during major cooking sessions, say - or cools down at night-time. After the key basics of fast cooling and unwavering temperature stability, other nice-to-have features of a good fridge include low energy consumption (particularly as this appliance is always on) and ample and flexible storage so that you can configure the layout as needs dictate – for example, making room for that over-large turkey. In addition, a fridge that is straightforward to use and clean, with readily accessible and removable storage features, clearly laid out programme settings and a brightly lit interior so that you can find anything you need without too much rooting around are all aspects that make life that little bit easier.

Our testers have considered all these elements to bring you independent results on 12 fridge models, four of which have achieved Choice Buy status through being great all-rounders. Our current Choice Buys feature two freestanding and two built-in models.



## Clean regime

Given that refrigeration is all about food safety, these appliances need to be kept thoroughly clean and consumers have ranked ease of cleaning as a major priority. As a result, we have adjusted our testing slightly in recent times – whereas ease of cleaning used to form part of our overall ease-of-use rating, it is now considered separately. The best-rated appliances will provide smooth, easy-to-clean surfaces with no awkward corners or dirt-trapping areas, as well as shelves, drawers and other storage accessories that can be removed without difficulty to facilitate a good wash.

Having sought out a fridge that is easy to clean, consumers will then need to put in some work themselves. To ensure that your fridge is a safe environment for the food you and your family will be eating, *safe food* – the body that promotes awareness of food safety and nutrition issues on the island of Ireland – strongly urges regular cleaning, paying particular attention to the fridge handle, shelves and storage compartments. All surfaces should be washed thoroughly using warm, soapy water and then rinsed clean before being dried completely with a clean towel or kitchen roll. When cleaning your fridge, make sure not to use cleaning products that may leave a taste in food or that would damage the interior of the appliance. Other good fridge habits include wiping up spills immediately and carrying out a weekly check to get rid of any foods that have passed the 'use-by' date.



## Safe storage for festive food

Keeping our families safe from potentially harmful bacteria in our food is an all-year-round job, but the festive season puts extra pressure on our food-safety practices. With so much food going around that needs to be stored correctly, fridges are put under considerable strain and may be bursting at the seams. Crammed fridges create a number of problems that could lead to the growth of food-poisoning bacteria. Firstly, overstuffed fridges mean that the cool air cannot circulate properly, which can result in a rise in fridge temperature to a dangerous level where bacteria can develop. Secondly, food in such close proximity can lead to cross contamination where bacteria are transferred – for example, from raw foods like meat and poultry to ready-to-eat foods – potentially leading to food-poisoning risks. So what can you do to help to ensure a healthy as well as a happy Christmas? Here are nine steps suggested by *safe food* to stay safe from food poisoning:

1. Before doing a major Christmas shop, clear out your fridge to make space for your turkey and all the extras.
2. Try to avoid food waste by using up any food that you have stored before buying festive fare.
3. Get rid of any half-used jars of sauces and other items that have been lurking too long in the back of your fridge.
4. Do an inventory of use-by dates and throw out any out-of-date food.
5. Give the fridge a good wash using warm soapy water.
6. Work out how you will try to fit everything in, prioritising items like the turkey, which should be placed in a dish or tray on the bottom shelf so that nothing drips onto other foods.
7. Resist the temptation to buy too much in the first place – the shops are only closed for a day or two and you don't want to end up throwing lots away.
8. Again looking at priorities, valuable fridge space can be created by removing all drinks except milk and juice – you can store wine and beer outside, in a shed or garage or in a cool box and chill them by sitting unopened bottles in cold water for around 30 minutes before drinking.

9. To ensure that your fridge is at a safe storage temperature of 5°C or below, invest in a mercury-free fridge thermometer.

## Previous Choice Buys

The last time we looked at the fridge category we were able to recommend two models, both of which remain available in shops. For those looking for a tall, integrated model, the Bosch KIR81AF30G is an extremely impressive fridge that scored top marks for its powerful and fast cooling, excellent temperature stability and frugal energy consumption. For a built-in appliance it is exceptionally roomy with 245 litres of usable storage and a range of options for organising shelving to maximise space. At a current price of €1,052, it is still a very pricey model, however. With a comparatively modest price tag of €430, the Zanussi ZRA40100WA is another tall fridge that will do a great job of cooling your food and keeping it safely chilled. With particularly spacious dimensions, this freestanding fridge provides a whopping 321 litres of usable volume, making it suitable for even the largest and hungriest of households, and again impressed with its low energy consumption and quiet operation. For full reviews of these models, see the May 2015 issue of *Consumer Choice*.





### 1. Bosch KSV33VW30G €600 (Freestanding)

The **Choice Buy** Bosch KSV33VW30G is a tall, freestanding fridge that scored extremely highly in our tests, impressing in almost every category. This Bosch model offers powerful cooling, with the ability to get food to safe temperatures very speedily – and if an extra boost is needed, you can activate what the manufacturer calls the “SuperCooling” function. What’s more, having chilled the contents fast, this fridge will keep everything nicely cold regardless of how the outside room heats up or cools down, with the automatic interior fan helping to ensure even temperatures throughout the appliance. It is very spacious with a generous usable volume of 249 litres over its seven shelves and five door racks, and it includes a humidity-controlled salad drawer for keeping certain fruit and vegetables fresher for longer. Testers found plenty to like with this fridge, including its energy efficiency, ease of use, brightly lit interior and quiet operation, though they did feel it could be easier to clean – a minor quibble, perhaps, among all the positives.



### 2. Siemens KI21RAF30G €719 (Built-in)

The **Choice Buy** Siemens KI21RAF30G is an in-column, over-counter fridge that can be built into your fitted kitchen for an integrated finish and that provides top-notch cooling performance. It does an excellent job of getting contents safely cold very quickly and a boost function adds an extra blast of chilling when required. The manufacturer’s recommended setting will keep the interior at the right temperature for safe food storage and temperatures will generally remain stable throughout, though if the weather is very warm it may be worth checking with a fridge thermometer that the fridge has not heated up slightly. As well as being very quiet, this Siemens model is quite frugal in terms of energy consumption. It offers four shelves, three of which are adjustable, plus one removable half shelf, three door racks and a salad crisper drawer that comes with a switch for controlling humidity to keep conditions ideal for certain fruit and vegetables. The brightly lit interior provides 99 litres of usable space and an alarm will sound if you don’t close the fridge door properly.



### 3. Bosch KIR21VS30G €930 (Built-in)

The **Choice Buy** Bosch KIR21VS30G is a pricey built-in larder fridge that can be hidden behind a kitchen cabinet door for a streamlined look and that performs well all round. Any fresh food items popped into this fridge will be chilled very quickly to a safe temperature and a supercool function is on hand to provide an extra boost if, for example, you are adding a large amount of shopping and don’t want to risk raising the temperature of other contents already inside. Once everything has been safely chilled, the temperature will remain generally very stable – though, if the weather turns very hot, you might need to lower the thermostat slightly. The operation of this appliance is very quiet indeed so you won’t be bothered by a background hum in the corner of your kitchen, and this Bosch model is also extremely energy efficient for a minimum impact on your electricity bills. The 103 litres of usable space is divided by four glass shelves, three of which are height adjustable, as well as a salad crisper drawer and three door racks.



### 4. Siemens KS36VAW31G €1,030 (Freestanding)

The **Choice Buy** Siemens KS36VAW31G is the priciest of our current Choice Buys but you get a lot of fridge for your money, not to mention high performance standards. This tall, freestanding fridge offers a generous usable volume of 237 litres and all fresh food added to the spacious interior will be chilled quickly down to safe temperatures. This may sometimes cause already chilled contents to warm up slightly but nothing that should have an impact on quality or safety. You can rely on the manufacturer’s recommended setting to create the perfect temperature for safe storage and temperatures inside this fridge will remain stable, regardless of how hot or cold the surrounding room gets. As well as providing ample storage, this fridge provides flexibility with six shelves and five door racks that can be configured to suit your needs – and there are two salad crisper drawers, one of which has a switch to control the humidity level. Other appealing features of this excellent Siemens appliance include frugal energy use and very quiet operation – and it is also easier to clean than many other models.



MODEL		SPECIFICATIONS						TEST PERFORMANCE							SCORE%
		Price (€)	Freestanding or built-in (F or B)	Energy label	Size (cm) (hx-wxd)*	Usable fridge volume (litres)	Supercool function	Cooling power (30%)	Temperature stability (20%)	Energy use (15%)	Ease of use (10%)	Cleaning (10%)	Recommended thermostat setting (10%)	Noise and vibrations (5%)	
1	Bosch KSV33VW30G	600	F	A++	177x60x58	249	✓	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	93
2	Siemens KI21RAF30G	719 online	B	A++	88x56x51	99	✓	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	79
3	Bosch KIR21VS30G	930	B	A++	88x56x51	103	✓	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★★★	78
4	Siemens KS36VAW31G	1030	F	A++	186x60x58	237	✓	★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	76
5	Grundig GSN10710DW	690	F	A+	185x60x58	282	✓	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★★	★	★★★★★	64
6	Beko LP1671D	480	F	A+	171x61x58	287		★★★★	★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★★	★★	★★★★	64
7	Bush BUCL6082	270	B	A+	83x61x51	108		★★★★	★★	★★★★★	★★	★★★★	★	★★★★★	61
8	Bush BUCL5585W	180	F	A+	86x56x51	99		★★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★★★	61
9	Miele K12010S-2	449	F	A+	85x56x54	115		★★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★	★	★★★★★	60
10	Smeg FAB28QP1	1300	F	A++	152x61x56	167		★★★	★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★★★	57
11	Liebherr T1710	350	F	A+	86x56x56	112		★★★★	★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★★	★	★★★★★	56
12	Gorenje ORB153C	900	F	A+++	153x60x58	178		★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★	★★★★★	★★★★	53

USING THE TABLE

Star ratings are out of five.

**SPECIFICATIONS**  
**Price:** Typical retailer’s price if you shop around. Prices found online only are indicated.  
**Size:** The dimensions given are the minimum size rounded upwards to the nearest centimetre but do not include air gaps or spaces recommended by the manufacturer.  
**Usable fridge volume:** As measured in our labs and rounded to the nearest litre.

**TEST PERFORMANCE**  
**Cooling power:** Rating for the time taken to cool down both light and heavy loads in the fridge to a safe temperature, with and without the supercool function.  
**Temperature stability:** Rating for the evenness and stability of the temperature in the fridge at room temperatures of 10°C, 25°C and 32°C.  
**Energy use:** Rating for the energy consumption of the appliance over 24 hours relative to the usable volume of the fridge, both with and without supercool functions switched on.  
**Ease of use:** Includes ratings for the ease of accessing and using the storage features and of adjusting the controls and programming settings, as well as the visibility and/or audibility of any warnings and the brightness of the interior lighting.  
**Cleaning:** Rating for the ease of cleaning the interior and exterior of the fridge.  
**Recommended thermostat setting:** Rating for the accuracy of the manufacturer’s recommended thermostat setting on the appliance.  
**Noise and vibrations:** Rating for the level of noise and vibration emitted by the appliance when switched on and while running.

Useful websites

**Bosch**  
tel 01 4502655  
www.bosch-home.co.uk

**Siemens**  
tel 01 450 2655  
www.siemens-home.com/ie/

\* The dimensions given are the minimum size rounded upwards to the nearest centimetre but do not include air gaps or spaces recommended by the manufacturer.



# Smartphones

**Our labs put 36 smartphones to the test to find out which ones are a clever buy.**



**REPORT** by Clodagh O'Donoghue

**At a glance**

- 36 smartphones on test
- Price points
- 13 Choice Buys

Buying a new smartphone can represent a major financial investment, but with a range of price points available, you do not have to break the bank. The models in our current test start at a positively modest €50 stretching upwards to a very hefty €880, and more if you are looking for generous onboard storage. So how much do you need to spend? It all depends on what you are looking for from your smartphone and how you will use it. *Consumer Choice* considers the trends evident in our latest batch of smartphones, how they fared in our rigorous tests and what you can expect at different price points.

## Smartphones on test

The move to smartphones came quickly and their growth in popularity has been matched by an increase in size. Now, big and bigger seem to be the main options available, with the vast majority of devices measuring around the 5-inch mark diagonally and quite a few straying into phablet territory with

screens of 5.5 inches or even more. The jump in screen size reflects the evolving usage of these devices, which are as much for consuming content as communication. However, for those who miss the more compact dimensions that were previously the norm, there are a few options that fall under the 5-inch mark and the neatest offering in our current batch is the iPhone SE, which makes the grade as a Choice Buy.

In terms of performance, it is tough at the top in the smartphone category, with often little to separate the great devices that feature on the first half of our table and more than a third of models in our current batch achieving Choice Buy status. These high-performing models share the attributes of speedy processing, dazzling displays, excellent cameras, and long battery life. They also each offer a selection of impressive features that range from fingerprint scanners for safe and swift access to advanced camera capabilities for getting creative with shots. ▶



Whether these features will appeal, and to what extent, will depend on individual preferences and how you plan to use your phone.

The models in the top half of the table are generally expensive purchases stretching into hundreds of euro, whereas there are some modestly priced options further down the list. These lower-scoring devices may be less impressive in terms of the crispness of their screens, the quality and versatility of their camera and video functions or the length of their battery life but, across the board, test scores were generally good to excellent for the basic tasks of calling, texting and browsing the internet – so if a device that can perform satisfactorily in these areas is all you require, there are many well-priced offerings that are worth considering.

### Price points

There are various key factors to be taken into account when you are looking for a new phone, such as which operating system you prefer, what size suits your needs, and how long you need the battery to last – but, for many of us, budget and how much we are willing to spend is the most important consideration of all.

As noted above, there are plenty of inexpensive new phones on the market and our testing has shown that, in general, most do a good job of delivering clear call quality and perform well when texting and surfing the internet. Many also offer decent screen resolution and are straightforward to use and pretty durable. So far so good...for those not looking beyond these attributes,

a well-chosen phone that costs around the €100 mark might well be very satisfactory, especially if you are not looking for vast amounts of storage – and with memory card slots a fairly common feature on Android and Windows phones, memory can be expanded as and when needed.

Before deciding to keep it cheap and cheerful, however, you might need to consider how fussy you are about fast operating speeds and whether or not you need a phone with a powerful processor that can handle the latest apps and games. You will also need to consider the camera aspect. Are you expecting that your phone will be your sole means of taking photos? If so, the lowest priced options are unlikely to fit your needs. On the other hand, though it is undoubtedly useful to have a ready-to-hand device to snap spontaneous moments, if you already have a decent compact camera that you can slip into your pocket or are a photographic enthusiast with high-end equipment to give you plenty of creative control, you do not need to look for a phone with impressive camera capabilities, which inevitably push up the price of the device.

Those who want more than just the basics but are unwilling to shell out the eye-watering price of flagship models can look to the middle ground. For the €200-€400 region, you may not get top-of-the-range specifications but you should be able to enjoy a crisp and detailed screen, generous battery life, a decent camera – especially for well-lit conditions – and fast processing. You are more likely to get a plastic finish rather than a sleek metal exterior and you may be

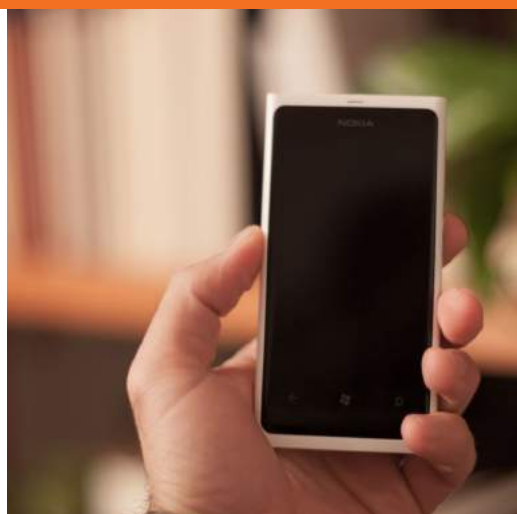
missing out on the latest advances, such as a fingerprint scanner or heart-rate monitor, but these you may be willing to live without.

Crank it up a notch to the highest-end models and you have a super-stylish, super-fast device that can handle even the most demanding apps and games with ease. The screen will be dazzlingly detailed for watching content and viewing pictures and you can happily leave your camera at home, with excellent photo and video recording quality on offer. There is little these phones cannot do it seems and their powerful batteries should keep them going for long stretches at a time.

Those yearning for a high-end model but without the means to finance the frankly alarming purchase price may be tempted to purchase these devices for an attractively low upfront cost by signing a monthly contract. However, you will need to calculate the total cost involved, factoring in the upfront charge plus potential insurance costs, and compare it with other deals. Think long and hard before signing on the dotted line as you will be tied into a lengthy contract – usually for 12 to 24 months – and you will nearly always end up paying more for the phone over the duration of the contract than the device costs in the first place. If you are considering such an offer, you will need to read through the terms and conditions, be sure you know what you are paying for so you can make the most of the service and remember that, if you embark on the contract and then decide you cannot manage it and want to cancel, you are likely to be charged a hefty cancellation fee.

## Evolving tests

Technological categories like that of smartphones are marked by rapid advances and changing usage and our independent labs seek to keep pace with such developments by adapting and modifying their tests accordingly. In addition, as specifications become ever more impressive, our tests respond by becoming ever more rigorous and demanding and testers' expectations also are raised, making marking even more stringent. For example, a smartphone screen that may have been rated highly two years ago may not be as striking when compared to screens of today and will not be scored as generously. The shifting usage of technological devices also requires that the weighting of test criteria changes to take account of areas that have become more or less important to users. You may notice that such changes have been made in our recent tests, with, for example, the importance given to the camera and video functions having increased, reflecting the greater emphasis placed on these capabilities by many users. As a result of this evolving testing, direct comparisons of products are best made within batches rather than from year to year.





## 1. Samsung Galaxy S7 €570

Heading our table, the **Choice Buy** Samsung Galaxy S7 has it all – looks, speed, and high performance across the board. This sleek and stylish device has a 5.1-inch screen that sports a dazzling display with 1440 x 2560 resolution for vibrant and crystal clear images and the powerful octa-core processor ensures that everything zips along at a lightning pace and effortlessly handles even the most demanding apps and games. With this phone, Samsung has reintroduced the micro-SD card slot, which went missing on the S6, enabling you to expand the 32GB of onboard storage, and accident-prone types might appreciate that this device is waterproof to a depth of 1.5 metres for up to 30 minutes. The rear-facing 12MP camera is particularly impressive, producing quality photos even in tricky low-light conditions; video can be shot in 4K; and the front-facing 5MP camera delivers crisp results that should please selfie fans who can use gesture or voice control to conveniently operate the shutter. Add a plethora of advanced features, including an accurate and responsive fingerprint scanner, and the Galaxy S7 amounts to an exceptional smartphone.

## 2. Apple iPhone 7 Plus €880

The **Choice Buy** Apple iPhone 7 Plus has a hefty price to match its large dimensions but it is undoubtedly an excellent phone, bringing incremental improvements to its already brilliant predecessor, the 6s Plus. The 5.5-inch, phablet-size device will be too big for some to hold comfortably while others will appreciate the roomy and very responsive screen on which to enjoy the vibrant colour and crisp detail of the 1080 x 1920 Retina HD display. The A10 Fusion processor is super speedy for the latest apps and games, while this phone also covers the basics with brilliantly clear call quality even with ambient noise. In a new departure for iPhones, the 7 Plus introduces waterproofing to a depth of one metre for up to 30 minutes and with good battery life, a camera that takes quality photos and an impressive video function, Apple's latest large iPhone ticks all the boxes. The price quoted is for the 32GB version, with the 128GB version sporting a breathtaking price tag of €980 – and there is still no memory card slot to expand storage.



## 3. Apple iPhone 7 €750

The **Choice Buy** Apple iPhone 7 boasts all the great qualities of its larger sibling, the 7 Plus, in a more compact package. The 4.7-inch display is beautifully bright with plenty of sharp detail and the touchscreen is extremely responsive, with everything zipping along very briskly indeed thanks to the powerful A10 processor. The 7 series improves on the already-great camera on the 6s with optical image stabilisation and a lens that lets in more light for more detailed images in dim conditions. Video can be shot on 4K though this will eat up storage and, with no memory card slot, footage will need to be stored in the cloud or on another device. The price quoted is for the 32GB version, with the 128GB and 256GB versions costing €850 and €950, respectively. On Apple's latest phones, the Home button is pressure sensitive rather than clickable, though the accurate fingerprint scanner can also be used to fire up the device, and with no dedicated headphone socket, an adaptor is supplied to attach wired headphones via the Lightning port for those not using wireless headphones.

## 4. Samsung Galaxy S7 Edge €670

Another large phone that straddles the divide between a phone and a tablet, the **Choice Buy** Samsung Galaxy S7 Edge has the distinction of a stylish feature that sees the edges of the screen gently curve around the sides of the device. Not just decorative, the edge can be put to use to show information or feeds or to display a menu of favourite contacts or apps, depending on how the owner decides to configure it. The 5.5-inch screen may be too big for some but it certainly shows off the vibrancy and detail of the 1440 x 2560 resolution display to full effect. Running the latest version of Android and with a powerful octa-core processor, this phone offers speedy operation coupled with generous battery life and excellent camera and video capabilities. Advanced features on offer include a fast and accurate fingerprint scanner for added security and a split-screen capability that allows you to display two apps at once. And having parted with a considerable sum to buy this phone, it is comforting to know it is dustproof and waterproof to a depth of 1.5 metres for up to 30 minutes.





## 5. LG G5 €630

The **Choice Buy** LG G5 offers an innovative modular design and a range of high-end specifications that make it an all-round great performer. At 5.3 inches, this is a large phone, which will not suit everyone, but the very high resolution 1440 x 2560 display is very pleasing on the eye and the 'always on' screen lets you see the time, date and any recent notifications at a glance. The appealing metallic frame lends a high-quality feel and, on the inside, this Android phone is a fast worker with the processor keeping everything running smoothly. As well as a front-facing 8MP camera, this phone offers dual rear cameras – a 16MP camera and an additional 8MP 135° wide-angle camera that testers found did a good job of producing quality photos. Unusually for a smartphone, it is relatively straightforward to replace the 'slide-out' battery so you can have a second spare battery on hand if you know you will not be able to recharge your device and you can also attach compatible accessories such as a 360° camera to this phone thanks to the modular design.



## 6. Sony Xperia Z5 €659

Another phone that does not come cheap but that delivers in terms of both looks and performance is the **Choice Buy** Sony Xperia Z5. The metal and frosted glass exterior makes for an attractive high-end appearance and feel and testers found that the fingerprint sensor that powers up the phone is conveniently located at the side of the device and works well. Though other top-of-the-range phones may be slightly faster, the octa-core processor on the Z5 will not disappoint when it comes to the smooth running of apps and games and this Android phone also impressed with its long battery life, bright and detailed display and responsive touchscreen. Sony has been waterproofing its premium devices for some years and this phone performed well in our water resistance tests so it should withstand the odd accidental drop in the sink or getting doused by a spilt drink. The 23MP camera on the rear of this device produces good high-resolution photos and there is a 5.1MP camera on the front for selfie lovers and video callers. You can expand the 32GB of storage via the micro-SD card slot.



## 7. Samsung Galaxy A5 €350

Costing considerably less than our previous Choice Buys with a price tag that is lower by a few hundred euro, the **Choice Buy** Samsung Galaxy A5 is a mid-range phone that nonetheless delivers many top-notch performance standards. From a manufacturer that certainly knows what it is doing with its flagship phones comes the Galaxy A5, which retains the stylish glass and metal design of its more expensive siblings and is very speedy thanks to the octa-core processor powering everything. This Android phone has a screen that measures 5.2 inches, so slightly larger than the Galaxy S7, and though the 1080 x 1920 resolution does not match the 1440 x 2560 resolution of the S7 and S7 Plus, the display is still nicely bright and detailed. The Galaxy A5 sports a fingerprint reader for easy access and added security and its somewhat scanty 16GB of memory is expandable via the micro-SD card slot. The 13MP takes decent shots and reasonable video, though it did not impress our testers as much as its higher-priced siblings in this regard. Very good battery life and handy features like NFC all add to the device's appeal.



## 8. Sony Xperia X €500

The **Choice Buy** Sony Xperia X is an elegant Android smartphone that scored well in our tests and is a good all-round performer. With a choice of four colours – graphite black, white, lime gold or rose gold – this metal-framed phone certainly looks the part and it is also zippy on the inside when loading web pages and more thanks to the speedy processor. The 1080 x 1920 resolution 5-inch screen produces plenty of detailed, crisp images, though it does not outshine other top-end phones, and the touchscreen is very responsive. Fairly long battery life will mean that you won't be left reaching for the charger too often and although there is only 20.2GB of storage of the total 32GB available after the operating system and preloaded apps are taken into account, the micro-SD card slot lets you rectify any memory shortage. The 23MP rear-facing camera delivers quality photos, though testers found that those taken in dim lighting may suffer slightly from a blue tinge, and selfie fans will appreciate the detail of the images produced by the 13MP front-facing camera, especially when taken outdoors.



## 9. Huawei P9 €470

With the **Choice Buy** Huawei P9, the Chinese manufacturer has sought to enter the premium market and has produced a 5.2-inch smartphone with much to recommend it. The processor is fast enough to deliver smooth and seamless operation and, though the screen might lack the 'wow' factor of some other Choice Buys, it is detailed and clear. As is becoming virtually standard on high-end phones, a fingerprint reader is provided for easy and secure access and all-important call quality is excellent on this device, even in challenging noisy environments. One key selling point that Huawei is keen to push is its collaboration with camera manufacturer Leica with the stated aim being to "reinvent smartphone photography". Certainly this smartphone offers plenty of scope for getting creative with shots with one novel addition being a dual lens that can combine the picture with blurred areas in the fore- or background. Shots taken were generally very good without being outstanding, with very decent video footage captured also and an 8MP front-facing camera that produces detailed selfies.

## 10. Sony Z5 Compact €533

For those for whom the 5-inch-plus phones are simply too big, the **Choice Buy** Sony Z5 Compact provides most of the same high specifications and great qualities of the 5.2-inch Sony Xperia Z5 in a neater 4.6-inch package. Along with the screen's size, its resolution has also been reduced to 720 x 1280 but the images displayed are still nicely sharp and clear. Inside the sleek glass and metal frame, operation and menu navigation is pretty swift and smooth thanks to the octa-core processor and testers found the touchscreen to be very responsive and battery life to be above average. When it comes to the basics of call quality, this phone performs very well even in noisy surroundings and the rear-facing 23MP camera produces shots that are generally of high quality. Like its bigger brother, the Xperia Z5 Compact provides an accurate fingerprint sensor that is conveniently positioned on the side of the device and the micro-SD card slot allows you to expand the 32GB of storage on this phone, which has the added bonus of dust and water resistance.



## 11. Apple iPhone SE €460

Those who do not want to go large in terms of their smartphone have the option of the **Choice Buy** iPhone SE – and an excellent option it is. This device is a palm-friendly four inches, enabling it to be operated easily with one hand, and it squeezes some very high-end internal specifications into its compact body that make for impressive operation. With a display resolution of 640 x 1136, the iPhone SE's screen will not match the vibrancy of other Choice Buys, but this phone SE is very speedy thanks to its A9 processor and battery life measured a satisfactory 14 hours of permanent call time in tests. The main 12MP camera produces images that are crisp and clear – though the poorer image quality of the 1.2MP front-facing camera could be disappointing for selfie lovers. The device's camera can record video in ultra-HD 4K resolution, though such footage will demand massive amounts of limited storage space. The €460 price tag is for the 16GB version, with the 64GB model costing €560.

## 12. HTC 10 €600

The **Choice Buy** HTC 10 is the latest flagship phone from the Taiwan manufacturer that hits all the high-end marks. With a screen size of 5.2 inches, this is a fairly large phone that not everyone will find comfortable to hold but the added space shows off the clear and detailed 1440 x 2560 resolution display. A responsive touchscreen and powerful processor add up to smooth and swift operation even with the latest apps and games and this phone also delivers on the basics of clear call quality. In addition, the HTC 10 offers exceptionally long battery life – our testers measured 27 hours in call time – so you won't be constantly reaching for the charger and, when you do, this device will charge up pretty quickly. HTC touts the introduction of optical image stabilisation on both the 12MP rear-facing and 5MP front-facing cameras as effectively removing the effects of handshake, and shots from both cameras were generally good. Other appealing features include a micro-SD card slot for expanding storage and an effective fingerprint sensor for quick and secure access.

## 13. HTC P9 Lite €240

The **Choice Buy** HTC P9 Lite is a pared-down version of the Choice Buy Huawei P9, and it has a pared-down price to match. The P9 Lite sacrifices the stylish metallic body of the P9 for a plastic finish and although its processor is not quite as powerful, everything zips along very nicely so you will be unlikely to notice much difference in speed. The P9 Lite retains the 5.2-inch screen dimensions of its pricier counterpart and the display is sharp and clear. Call clarity on the slimmed down version does not live up to that of the flagship phone in challenging noisy conditions but overall call quality still scored well. The Lite edition only offers 16GB of storage, though this can be expanded via the micro-SD card slot, and it also loses the dual lens featured on the P9. Generally, the quality of the shots produced by the Lite's 13MP camera, although very decent, did not score as highly as other top-of-the-range phones. Nonetheless, for some, this lighter version of a high-end phone will tick enough boxes to make it the perfect compromise when weighing up budget and capabilities.



MODEL		SPECIFICATIONS						TEST PERFORMANCE								SCORE %
		Best price pre-pay (€)	Operating system	Weight (g)	Screen size (inches)	Screen resolution	Camera resolution (MP)	Internal storage (GB)	Handset (18%)	Ergonomics (17%)	Calling (12%)	Browsing and texting (18%)	Camera and video (20%)	Music (10%)	Navigation (5%)	
1	Samsung Galaxy S7	570	Android 6.0.1	151	5.1	1440 x 2560	12	32	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	79
2	Apple iPhone 7 Plus	880	iOS 10.0.2	188	5.5	1080 x 1920	12	32*	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	78
3	Apple iPhone 7	750	iOS 10.0.2	137	4.7	750 x 1334	12	32*	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	78
4	Samsung Galaxy S7 Edge	670	Android 6.0.1	155	5.5	1440 x 2560	12	32	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	78
5	LG G5	630	Android 6.0.1	158	5.3	1440 x 2560	16	32	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	77
6	Sony Xperia Z5	659	Android 5.1.1	153	5.2	1080 x 1920	23	32	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	76
7	Samsung Galaxy A5	350	Android 5.1.1	155	5.2	1080 x 1920	13	16	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	75
8	Sony Xperia X	500	Android 6.0.1	153	5	1080 x 1920	23	32	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	74
9	Huawei P9	470	Android 6.0	144	5.2	1080 x 1920	12	32	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	74
10	Sony Xperia Z5 Compact	533	Android 5.1.1	138	4.6	720 x 1280	23	32	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	74
11	Apple iPhone SE	460	iOS 9.3.1	113	4	640 x 1136	12	16	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	73
12	HTC 10	600	Android 6.0.1	160	5.2	1440 x 2560	12	32	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	72
13	Huawei P9 Lite	240	Android 6.0	145	5.2	1080 x 1920	13	16	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	72
14	HTC One M8s	380	Android 5.0.2	160	5	1080 x 1920	13	16	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	71
15	HTC One A9	350	Android 6.0.1	143	5	1080 x 1920	13.1	16	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	70
16	Huawei Mate S	460	Android 5.1.1	158	5.5	1080 x 1920	13	32	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	70
17	Microsoft Lumia 950	330	Windows 10 Mobile	152	5.2	1440 x 2560	18.7	32	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	69
18	Samsung Galaxy A3	250	Android 5.1.1	132	4.7	720 x 1280	13	16	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★★★★	★★★	69
19	Microsoft Lumia 950XL	590	Windows 10 Mobile	167	5.7	1440 x 2560	18.7	32	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	68
20	LG G4c	180	Android 5.0.2	138	5	720 x 1280	8	8	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★	68
21	Sony Xperia XA	230	Android 6.0	136	5	720 x 1280	13	16	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★	67
22	LG X Screen	210	Android 6.0.1	121	5	720 x 1280	13	16	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★	65
23	Samsung Galaxy J3	150	Android 5.1.1	137	5	720 x 1280	8	8	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★	64
24	Vodafone Smart Ultra 6	180	Android 5.0.2	152	5.5	1080 x 1920	13	16	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★	64
25	Motorola Moto G 3rd gen.	120	Android 5.1.1	153	5	720 x 1280	13	8	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★★	63
26	Huawei Y5 II	80	Android 5.1	139	5	720 x 1280	8	8	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	62
27	Microsoft Lumia 650	130	Windows 10 Mobile	121	5	720 x 1280	8	16	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★	60
28	Vodafone Smart Prime 7	130	Android 6.0.1	135	5	720 x 1280	8	8	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★★★	★★★	60
29	Sony Xperia E5	150	Android 6.0	144	5	720 x 1280	13	16	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★★	★★★★	59
30	Huawei Y6	100	Android 5.1.1	155	5	720 x 1280	8	8	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★★★	★★★	59
31	LG K8	180	Android 6.0	141	5	720 x 1280	8	8	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★	58
32	Alcatel OneTouch POP 4 Plus	110	Android 6.0.1	151	5.5	720 x 1280	8	16	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★★★	★★★★	58
33	Microsoft Lumia 550	80	Windows 10 Mobile	141	4.7	720 x 1280	5	8	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★★	★★★	55
34	Alcatel OneTouch Pop 4	120	Android 6.0.1	133	5	720 x 1280	8	8	★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★★★	★★★	52
35	Alcatel Pixi 4	50	Android 5.1	189	6	540 x 960	8	8	★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★	★★★★	★★★	51
36	Vodafone Smart Turbo 7	80	Android 6.0	166	5	480 x 854	5	8	★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★★★	★★★	51

\* 128GB and 256GB versions also available

### USING THE TABLE

Star ratings are out of five.

#### SPECIFICATIONS

**Best price pre-pay:** The lowest available Pay-As-You-Go price. Prices are provided for the lowest specification model, generally with the lowest available memory option. Contract prices will vary.  
**Operating System:** The operating system that comes on the device. This can often be upgraded to a newer version as it becomes available.

**Screen size:** Measured diagonally in inches.

**Weight:** Including SIM card and battery in grams.

**Internal storage:** The internal storage available on the tested version of the device. The available storage will be less than this when the space used by the operating system and any preinstalled apps is taken into account.

#### TEST PERFORMANCE

**Handset:** Includes ratings for the versatility and range of connections and features on the handset, the available memory storage, battery life and sound quality via the integrated speakers.

**Ergonomics:** Includes ratings for the ease of use and portability of the handset; its durability in terms of scratch, shock and water resistance; and the size, resolution, readability and responsiveness of the screen.

**Calling:** A rating for the general ease of use of making calls and the sound quality of calls made and received, with and without ambient noise.

**Browsing and texting:** A rating for the ease of inputting text, typing emails and browsing the internet as well as for surfing speed.

**Camera and video:** Includes ratings for the front and rear cameras’ versatility and ease of use as well as for the quality of photos taken and for the picture and audio recording quality of the video function.

**Music:** Includes ratings for sound quality, player versatility, music transfer capabilities and ease of use.

**Navigation:** A rating for the GPS navigation quality, accuracy and features out of the box.

#### Useful contacts

**Apple Ireland Ltd**  
1800 804 062  
[www.apple.com/ie](http://www.apple.com/ie)

**HTC**  
tel 1800 995 482  
[www.htc.com/ie](http://www.htc.com/ie)

**Huawei**  
tel 1890 482 934  
<http://huaweireland.ie/>

**LG**  
tel (01) 686 9454  
[www.lg.com/ie/](http://www.lg.com/ie/)

**Samsung**  
tel 0818 717 100  
[www.samsung.com/ie](http://www.samsung.com/ie)

**Sony**  
tel 1850 545 888  
[www.sony.ie](http://www.sony.ie)



# Choice Buy Roundup 2016

**Whether you are thinking of a festive gift or planning to hit the January sales, here is a rundown of just some of the great products that impressed us in 2016.**



**REPORT** by Clodagh O'Donoghue

#### At a glance

- A year of Choice Buys
- Our testing

Another year has passed and our independent labs have scrutinised and studied, analysed and assessed, probed and prodded hundreds of appliances and devices, from turntables to tumble dryers and from headphones to smartphones. Here at *Consumer Choice*, we like to take the opportunity each December to look back over 12 months of Choice Buys to highlight the most impressive products and best bargains revealed by our rigorous testing.

#### Our tests

To bring you our test results, the Consumers' Association of Ireland (CAI) works closely with International Consumer Research and Testing (ICRT). A global consortium of over 35 consumer organisations from across Europe and from such countries as Australia, New Zealand, the US and Hong Kong, ICRT arranges and coordinates testing for a wide array of product categories. Like the CAI, all ICRT members are committed to acting exclusively in the consumer interest. A key common factor is that they do not accept advertising and are independent of commerce, industry and political parties.

ICRT enables consumer associations to work together to provide high-quality and independent information on goods and services to consumers around the world. Each test is run by one member organisation with input from the other organisations as to what the tests should involve and what products should be included. Rather than being supplied by manufacturers, the products are purchased anonymously from shops and websites so they are independently sourced and truly representative of models on offer to consumers.

Once purchased, the products are delivered to one of the 60 or so highly specialised laboratories worldwide that are used to carry out the tests using state-of-the-art testing equipment.

The tests assess if the products adhere to government and industry standards but they also go beyond these standards, applying more stringent and rigorous criteria. The tests are designed to reflect how people actually use the products and the testing may evolve and develop from year to year as consumers' usage changes or as new developments are introduced by



manufacturers. Ratings are drawn from technical measurements, assessments by expert panels, and, when appropriate, the evaluations of regular consumers who are given hands-on experience with the products.

All these efforts are aimed at providing consumers with independent and objective evaluations of a broad range of popular and widely used appliances and devices so that consumers can be confident when making a purchase that their money is being well spent.

## Terrific technology

For those in the market for technology – whether looking to ‘self-gift’ or upgrade their personal devices or seeking a present for a gadget geek close to them – *Consumer Choice* has cast its eye over a plethora of techie treats, from action cameras to tablet pcs, over the last year. Here’s what stood out from the crowd in our tests.

## Action Cameras

For thrill seekers and dare-devils looking to record their escapades for posterity, a great action camera is an essential piece of kit – but even less adventurous types might be keen to own a device that offers the ultimate in durability and portability and can deliver ever-improving quality in terms of video footage. For €430, those interested in an action camera can consider the GoPro Hero4 Silver Edition, a neat, very lightweight little device that is easier to use than many other devices in the category and has the capability to shoot in 4K ultra-HD. The picture quality, particularly for daylight shots, is great, with lower lighting conditions not presenting too much of a challenge, and adding a submersible case means that the device will be waterproof up to a depth of 40 metres. A 43mm LCD touchscreen display comes in handy for composing shots, changing modes and settings and more, boosting the camera’s ease of use.

Those who are not looking for 4K recording could consider the Sony HDR-AS200V (€480), which produces great full HD picture quality at its top resolution of 1920 x 1080, excelling in daylight and also managing to do a good job in lower-light conditions. A casing can be added to make it both shockproof and waterproof to a depth of 5 metres and the electronic image stabilisation is effective at smoothing out jerky motion. Other positives include built-in wi-fi, a wide-angle capability, GPS, NFC, and

loop recording.

Our most reasonably priced Choice Buy from last May’s test was the Ricoh WG-M1, which topped our table – and zealous types may be able to find this product online still for around €250. This tough little action camera will deliver good image quality in a variety of challenging environments and it also offers good battery life, ease of use and effective image stabilisation.

## Cameras

For those looking to capture still life more often than high-speed action, our June issue spotlighted some high-end cameras that produce quality results for more ambitious photographers looking to get creative. Devices are pricey at this end of the camera market, with our last batch of Choice Buy models stretching up to almost €3,000. Such ultra-hefty price tags were attached to our two DSLR cameras, the Nikon Df and the Canon EOS 5D Mark III. These are heavyweights in every sense of the word, as, in addition to their considerable bulk, they offer all manner of manual controls for the keen photographer and the images produced are superbly sharp. Despite the high purchase

price, the Nikon Df lacks a video recording option and the Canon model does not offer wi-fi connectivity – but they are swift to start up, provide fast responsive times, deliver speedy and accurate focussing and much more.

Among the five compact system cameras (CSCs) that we discussed, the most expensive offering, the Sony Alpha 7S (€2,150), with its full frame sensor specialises in low-light photography and for those who frequently seek to capture photos and videos in challenging lighting conditions, it could be the camera of choice. The Panasonic DMC-GX8 (€960) sports an attractive retro design, and plenty of up-to-the-minute features, and it scored very well for ease of use. This is in contrast to the Olympus OM-D E-M1 (€1,200), which testers noted requires a little time for users to get into the rhythm of controlling it quickly. Once mastered, however, this camera lets users adjust settings swiftly to achieve

excellent results and, though not officially a rugged camera, this device is solidly built and freezeproof. The Olympus OM-DE-M5 Mark II (€1,100) was found to be a great all-rounder that comes with a full range of manual controls for unleashing photographic creativity along with a good array of automated functions for the less adventurous user. The least expensive CSC and indeed the cheapest Choice Buy from the entire batch was the Canon EOS M10, which costs around €440 with lens and is neatly proportioned and lightweight but still manages to take great photos. Although this is not the speediest camera and lacks a wide range of manual controls for the more ambitious photographer, its appeal focuses on its ease of use, helped by the excellent touchscreen monitor.

We were able to award eight bridge cameras Choice Buy status, with the products ranging in price from around €600 to €1,500. Virtually all of the cameras on test remain available and some have come down in price, though not by much. For your money, you will get some advanced features in a very portable package without the hassle of interchangeable lenses. In addition, the superzoom capabilities of some models can be a huge bonus and the quality of the still images will be impressive. Interestingly, many of these devices also excel when it comes to video footage – so although these cameras are pricey, they could remove the need for a dedicated camcorder.

## Printers

It is one thing taking great photos but another thing printing them out. Although printing photos at home may not be the most cost-effective option, many of our Choice Buy printers from our September issue can perform impressively here when required. The best choice for printing photos tend to be inkjet printers and our top Choice Buy among inkjet models was the Epson Expression Premium XP-830, which proved itself to be a great all-rounder with plenty of bells and whistles. This all-in-one colour inkjet printer offers fairly fast printing with great quality text and photos produced and the copying and scanning functions work very well generally, especially when it comes to colour copies and photo scans. This easy-to-use printer can also fax, is quite frugal in terms of ink usage, and offers wi-fi connectivity and such features as automatic double-sided printing, scanning and copying – so, at €190, it is not cheap but you get a lot for your money.





On the other end of the price scale and the cheapest device in our September tests was the Canon Pixma MG3650. Currently priced at €65 - and you may be able to buy it for even less - this colour inkjet printer can scan and copy as well as print, performing well across the board. Print quality is very decent, though images and photos are slower to emerge than text prints, and the wi-fi connectivity lets you print directly from a range of devices. One thing to note, however, is that this printer uses a combined colour cartridge, so you may end up having to replace the cartridge for all three colours when only one colour has been used up.

The highest scoring printer on test was an all-in-one laser printer - the Samsung Xpress M2885FW (€270). This hard-working, multitasking machine can print, scan, copy and fax and is speedy at all tasks, living up to the 'Xpress' billing in its name. This Samsung model can print only in black and white but the results are sharp and high-quality, especially for text pages - and there are plenty of options for connecting with mobile devices and handy features on offer. Laser printers are pretty economical with ink anyway but this device is exceptionally cheap to run, helping to somewhat offset the hefty purchase price.

Those who are not looking to use their printer for scanning and copying but who need colour printing could consider instead the HP Colour Laserjet Pro M252dw (€220). All printing tasks are performed speedily and to a good standard with particularly crisp and sharp text pages, though, as with most laser printers, photo prints suffer from a degree of graininess.

A good value option for those who want their black-and-white prints fast and are not fussed about added features is the Samsung Xpress M2026w. Priced at €110, this laser printer sticks to the basics and performs them very well, with inexpensive running

costs an added bonus. There are no scanning or copying functions and this device cannot print in colour but its black-and-white text pages are nicely crisp and sharp and this Samsung model again takes the 'Xpress' in its title to heart, delivering all types of prints very quickly.

### Turntables

In our July/August issue we catered to music fans with our first report on turntables in many years. It may have looked as if the record player was going the way of the dodo for some time, but this category has been making a comeback in recent years and has now evolved from an underground niche interest into a more mainstream trend. Three of our Choice Buys from our test remain available though it may be a case of seeking these devices out online and they do not come cheap. The Teac TN-300 (€400) and Flexson VinylPlay (€320) both deliver in terms of all-important superb sound quality and they are easy to use to boot. These are manual turntables so you will need to place the tonearm on the record and remove it afterwards and neither can play '78s'. They come with built-in preamps for directly connecting the turntables to an amplifier and offer handy USB ports to facilitate the process of digitising your records. Budding DJs might like what the Audio-Technica AT-LP120-USB has to offer, as it is a direct-drive turntable with the motor connected directly to the platter on which the record spins, so it gets up to full speed immediately and tracks can be played in reverse, which can be useful for mixing. Again, sound quality is excellent, and, as well as 33rpm and 45rpm, this manual turntable can play at 78rpm, though you will need a separate cartridge.



### Headphones

We don't always want to share our music and just last month *Consumer Choice* looked at a large

batch of 45 headphones models that can variously be worn on ear, over ear and in ear to uncover the best of the bunch. We noted that prices varied hugely in this category, ranging from a mere €25 for an on-ear set to a whopping €410 for an over-ear model and that a high price did not necessarily translate into a high score in our tests. Three

over-ear models that did score highly and that achieved Choice Buy status were from the three major manufacturers in the market - Sony, Sennheiser and Bose. In keeping with the main trend in headphones - the increasing move to wireless connectivity - the Sony MDR-100ABN over-ear headphones are wireless, though you have the option of adding the supplied cable if the battery runs out, and they deliver top-notch audio across all musical genres and the spoken word. In addition, the active noise-cancelling technology does a great job of eliminating any unwanted noise and a wide-ranging set of controls are conveniently positioned on the headphones themselves.

The Sennheiser RS 175 headphones are also wireless, though they are strictly for use at home as, instead of using Bluetooth or some other mobile-friendly standard, they work with their own transmitter that can be connected to a TV, hi-fi or home entertainment system and has a stated range of 100 metres. Importantly, audio quality



was found to be outstanding, scoring top marks across all our listening tests, and these headphones offer both comfort and good battery life. The Bose SoundTrue AE II (€180) headphones similarly provide superb audio and are on the lightweight end of over-ear models, adding to their comfort. There is no wireless option but the generously long cable offers a microphone and plenty of controls for accepting and ending calls, adjusting settings,

pausing and playing tracks and more. With these headphones, you can choose between a version that is compatible with Apple devices or one designed for use with Android devices.

Undoubtedly the best value among our Choice Buys in our November test was the Sony MDR-ZX330 (€90), the only on-ear model in the batch to make the grade as a Choice Buy. These headphones deliver excellent sound quality, are wireless with Bluetooth connectivity and offer long battery life of up to 40 hours. As well as being reasonably comfortable and extremely durable, they are easy to use, with a full set of controls positioned on the right earpad and you can even make and receive calls, all without touching your phone.

### Tablet PCs and Phones

We are due to look at tablet pcs again early in the New Year but the excellent

recommendations from our February issue remain readily available on shop shelves. Unsurprisingly, Samsung and Apple topped our tables yet again both in the larger tablet category and among devices measuring 8.5 inches diagonally or less. The Samsung Galaxy Tab S2 9.7 (€480) proved itself to be the highest-scoring tablet we have ever tested by some margin. Testers found it to be exceptionally light, super-slim, extremely comfortable to hold in one hand for long periods and a pleasure to use thanks to its brilliantly crisp 2048 x 1536 resolution display, highly responsive touchscreen and ultra-speedy processor. Those who are impressed by the sound of this device but looking for something more compact and a little less pricey can check out its eight-inch sibling, the Samsung Galaxy Tab S2 8 (€400), which manages to squeeze all the same eye-catching specifications and superb performance into a condensed package. Apple fans can choose between little and large iPad offerings. On the large end, we looked at the 12.9-inch version of the Apple iPad Pro, aimed at those looking for a larger device that can double as a laptop replacement, though the larger screen size inevitably means a heftier weight affecting comfort of one-handed holding. The 2732 x 2048 resolution display is stunningly sharp and, with a super-fast processor, this tablet is incredibly speedy – we must note, however, that, as there is no memory card slot, the tested 32GB device may not afford enough storage for those using it as a laptop replacement, and the 128GB version is an even more eye-wateringly expensive €1,119. The iPad Pro 9.7, released earlier this year and sporting more familiar iPad dimensions, has also been to our labs and testers in fact preferred it to its larger sibling. We will report on this device fully in our next tablets test. Apple fans looking for a smaller tablet can look to the compact proportions of the very excellent iPad mini 4.

A not-too-distant cousin of the tablet is the ebook reader and we reported on the new Amazon Kindle Oasis in our October issue. This device offered some interesting new twists on its predecessors with its asymmetrical design that makes it extremely slimline down one side and tapering out on the other side to house the processor and battery with the aim of providing an ergonomic grip and a better-balanced reading experience for one-handed use. A fairly limited battery life is hugely enhanced by adding a cover that delivers automatic recharging. You will pay for all these design developments at a current cost of €380 and we noted that a relatively similar reading experience could be enjoyed on previous Kindle models for a fraction of that

price.

Topping many a festive wish list is a new smartphone and our labs recently completed testing on a batch of 36 models, with the report currently appearing on page 31 of this issue of *Consumer Choice*. With phones at a range of price points, it is very much a question of deciding what exactly you require from your device and whether only a high-end, high-price model will do or if a more modestly priced device could serve your needs just as well.

Sometimes a more simplified means of communication is what is needed and in our July/August issue, we looked at phones that focus on ease of use and accessibility rather than snazzy features and dizzying speeds. Our highlighted simple and accessible phones all came from the market leader in this category, Doro. The top Choice Buy was the Doro Liberto 820 Mini (€150), which combines the versatile functionality of a smartphone with the uncomplicated operation and accessibility of a specialised simple phone. Running a modified version of the Android operating system, the device offers a four-inch touchscreen that displays large text and icons, an 'easy mode' to reduce the number of options available, hearing aid compatibility and an emergency button that contacts five pre-set emergency numbers. A more basic, non-smart proposition is the Doro PhoneEasy 612 (€90), which is very simple to set up and use. The clamshell design that means you can answer and end calls by flipping it open and closed; the number buttons are large and backlit; and as well as an emergency function, there are three direct dial buttons that you can programme to instantly call key contact numbers.

## Televisions

Two manufacturers dominated our TV tests in our April issue – LG and, most especially, Samsung. In a quick-moving market, these models have largely been replaced by a new cohort of devices that are now on shop floors – and we will bring you the results for these early in the New Year. However, you may be able to bag a bargain with one of our Choice Buys still available and having come down significantly in price. We found the LG 55UF950V recently priced at €1,400, down from €3,300 earlier this year – and this big-screen device delivers stunning picture quality, superb sound quality, excellent 3D performance, integrated wi-fi and plenty of features. An added bonus is the wide viewing angle that means that large groups can watch the 55-inch screen without those at the edges being short-changed in terms of what they can see.

## Outstanding appliances

Although January may be a time for reining in spending after a splurge in December, the post-Christmas sales can certainly be a great time to replace a household appliance that is on the way out. And all the better if you know in advance what high-performing models to look out for when eyeing discounts on the shop floor. Here, we recap of just some of the excellent appliances that we have been happy to recommend over the last 12 months.



## Laundry machines

Although there are plenty of lower-priced tumble dryers on the market, our tests found that if you are looking for the ultimate in accurate and fast drying of fabrics of all kinds, the best options will not come cheap. Substantial price tags can be offset somewhat by impressive energy efficiency that will keep utility bills down and for low energy consumption the undoubted heroes are heat pump condenser dryers. The three heat pump condenser dryer Choice Buys we showcased in our October issue were the Bosch WTW7560GB (€970), the Siemens WT47W590GB (€950), and the Miele TKB540WP (€1,100). Not only do these machines cost little to run and deliver great drying performance thanks to accurate sensors, they are also fairly speedy – an area where heat pump condenser dryers have been known to struggle. In addition, you will be able to get plenty of laundry done in one go, with the Siemens and Miele models accommodating a generous 8kg of clothes and the Bosch machine squeezing in an impressive 9kg.

Coming down a little in price are our two Choice Buy condenser dryers, the Miele TDA 140 C (€850) and the Bosch WTG86400GB (€780). With no heat pump



technology, these machines are not as energy efficient as the previously mentioned models but they are no heavier on energy use than other appliances in their class. As well as providing thorough and even drying, these machines are very nippy indeed so you won't be left waiting too long for your clean clothes.

Those without the space for a stand-alone dryer and who need a multitasking machine that can wash laundry as well as dry it can look out for a Choice Buy from our July/August issue. The Bosch WVG30461GB (€730) is a freestanding washer dryer that not only excels at washing clothes but does a decent job of drying them also, delivering fast and even results. This easy-to-use appliance is fairly roomy with a drum that can hold 8kg of clothes when washing and 5kg when drying, so it should suit medium-to-large-sized households.



**Kitchen equipment**

This time last year we looked at four great dishwashers that would leave dishes sparkling and spotless. At the top end of the price range were the Bosch SMS88TW02G and the Samsung DW60H9950FW, currently priced at €900 and €1,050, respectively. For these hefty sums you will get roomy freestanding appliances with space for 14 place settings or around 140 items and these models not only excel at cleaning dishes, they are also superb at drying them. Both are very energy efficient, particularly on their energy-save programmes, so running costs can be kept down. An equally pricey model but this time one that can be integrated into a fitted kitchen is the Miele G4960 SCVi (€949). This energy-efficient machine delivers outstanding cleaning as well as very good drying and is easy to load and unload. Again, it can accommodate a generous 14 place settings. By far the least expensive Choice Buy in this batch at around half the

price of our other highlighted products is the Bosch SMS50C18UK. It will not fit as many items inside with only room for 12 place settings but all items will emerge from this machine thoroughly clean and dry. It is a particularly easy-to-use appliance, both in terms of loading and programme selection, and comes in stainless steel, white and black versions.

Those looking for a spacious, freestanding fridge freezer that delivers impressively fast freezing and cooling might like to consider the Samsung RB37J5230SA, reported on in our July/August issue. Dual-function appliances can struggle to impress in both tasks, but this fridge freezer performs excellently all round and, with a massive 220 litres of usable space in the fridge compartment plus a very decent 76 litres in the freezer, even larger households should not run out of space. The original price tag of €1,000 has come down a little in the intervening months and we found this top-rated fridge freezer recently for €890. When it comes to microwave ovens, our testers look for speedy heating and gentle, yet thorough, defrosting. In our April issue, we reported on three Samsung microwave ovens that more than deliver. The Samsung MS28J5255 (€218) cooks food swiftly and remains speedy even if you have to cook a number of items in quick succession. Four effective auto-defrost programmes are on offer, with 28 programmes in all to choose from to help you prepare a wide range of foodstuffs and a deodorisation feature to remove any unpleasant smells that may lurk behind when the cooking is done. The Samsung MS23H3125AK (€170) performs the basics of heating and defrosting extremely well and throws in a range of added features, such as an eco mode to reduce energy usage, a deodorisation function, and an antibacterial and scratch-resistant ceramic interior that testers found was easy to clean.

In contrast to these two solo microwaves, the Samsung MC28H5013AK (€190) is a multitasking combination microwave that can be used for baking as well as heating and defrosting with an integrated grill that can be used for toasting or browning purposes. Across the board, all functions are performed to a high standard and interesting features on this machine include a fermentation function that allows you to prove dough or make your own yoghurt.



## Price advice

A key factor in any purchasing decision is price, so to give you an accurate indication of how big a hole the products on test will put in your pocket, we check in a range of Irish shops to find the best price we can and we let you know when products could only be found on offer by online retailers. We do not record sale or promotional prices as such offers are temporary in nature and may no longer be available to consumers at the time of reading. We have repriced all products mentioned in this report to reflect the current market - however, because many of these models have been available for some months, a savvy shopper who conducts a thorough search may indeed find some of these products on sale for less than the price indicated here and be able to bag a bargain. As always, shopping around for the best available value is strongly recommended and urged by *Consumer Choice*.



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