

THREE HUNDRED AND NINETEENTH MEETING OF THE GENERAL CONSUMER COUNCIL FOR NORTHERN IRELAND HELD ON FRIDAY 27 MAY 2022 AT 10.00AM IN SEATEM HOUSE, ALFRED STREET, BELFAST AND VIA ZOOM TELECONFERENCE

319/1.1

ATTENDANCE

Ms Sheila McClelland	Chair
Mr Mick McAteer	Deputy Chair
Mrs June Butler	Board Member
Mrs Lynne Crowther	Board Member
Dr Sinéad Furey	Board Member
Mr Gerry McCurdy	Board Member
Mr Alan O'Neill	Board Member
Mr William Leathem	Board Member
Dr Joan Martin	Board Member
Ms Noyona Chundur	Chief Executive
Mr Peter McClenaghan	Director of Infrastructure and Sustainability
Ms Anne-Marie Murphy	Director of Strategy and Emerging Markets
Mr Scott Kennerley	Director of Financial and Postal Services
Mr William Warke	Director of Corporate Services
Mr Terry Campbell	Head of Finance and Governance
Mr Graham Smith (for part)	Head of Water
Mr Richard Williams (for part)	Head of Transport
Ms Hannah Brown (for part)	Senior Transport Policy Officer
Ms Michelle Kelly (for part)	Transport Policy Officer
Ms Bernie Tolan	PA to Chief Executive
Ms Julie Coulter	Administrative Officer

APOLOGIES

Amanda Logan	Board Member
Ms Dervla Kearney	Director of Consumer Empowerment

It was AGREED that Mr McAteer would chair the Board Meeting due to the Chair suffering with laryngitis.

319/1.2

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The Deputy Chair advised Board Members that any conflict of interest relating to agenda items should be recorded at the beginning of Council meetings. Should a Board Member have a conflict of interest they should leave the meeting at that particular agenda item and the minutes would reflect this.

He explained the Deputy Chair would have the ability to define a conflict of interest and requested Board Members' compliance if this arose.

No declarations were declared, and this was noted.

319/1.3

Minutes of the last meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 22 April 2022, having been circulated, were agreed as a true and correct record.

The Minutes were agreed and signed.

319/1.4 **Actions from the last meeting**

The Chief Executive updated Members on the following items:

- The 2022 Consumer Insight Survey will be shared with the Utility Regulator once the final report is agreed and available.
- Work on the CCNI-DfE Partnership Agreement is still underway, with feedback from the DfE Corporate Governance Team received. The next version of the document will be completed in July. This action will be closed.
- A photographer will be booked in June/July for staff who were unable to attend lunch with Board Members in March. Once this is complete, an updated organisation chart with staff photographs of those who give their consent will be shared with Board Members. This action will be closed.
- A review of 2022-2023 Forward Work Programme outputs will be incorporated into the programme for the annual Board Away Day in August with Lisa Manselli. This action will be closed.

The Actions from the last meeting were approved by Board Members.

319/1.5 **Matters Arising**

There were no Matters Arising.

319/1.6 **Chair's Business**

The Chair provided an update of the Partnership Engagement Event hosted by the DfE Permanent Secretary, Mike Brennan.

2. **PRESENTATIONS**

319/2.2 **Consumer Vulnerability: Low Income Households**

The Deputy Chair welcomed Mr McDade and Mr McCoy from Social Market Research (SMR). Mr Graham Smith joined the meeting.

Mr McCoy and Mr McDade advised the project involved 54 in-depth interviews in late February and March 2022 with people in the two lowest income deciles in Northern Ireland, and 20 case studies. Headline findings were:

- The people are caught between rising prices and stagnant or falling incomes, and this coupled with big increases in energy prices, is placing great hardship on many who have to choose between eating or heating their homes.

- Concern about paying bills in very high with many fearing they may not be able to afford food, rent or mortgage, or energy bills both with current pricing and the anticipated rises still to come.
- Many of those interviewed could be described as working poor who have to bear the costs of public transport or running a car to get to work, and as petrol and diesel prices go up, these face additional pressures on their budget.
- All interviewees budget, prioritise essentials, source cheaper brands, and look for bargains to save money, but the pressure on household budgets means around half regularly borrow money from friends or family, resulting in spiralling debt and a cycle of repaying and borrowing again.
- The cohort between 16-35 year olds is most adversely challenged, having sought their independence but now moving back home to live with parents.
- All interviewees are eating into savings with many exhausting emergency funds or are close to doing so, and having little or nothing put by for emergencies or an unexpected bill.
- All this is taken a toll on mental health. The words *worry, stress, isolated, depressed,* and *concerned* recurred in the interviews.
- There was worsening of the situation since the pandemic, especially regarding energy, with people making decisions on essentials to life. Some were concerned about using foodbanks because of the stigma and there was lot of anger about the situation people find themselves as it is not their fault, and more help was needed.

Members thanked Mr McDade and Mr McCoy, expressing how interesting and but equally upsetting the report the report was.

The Deputy Chair highlighted that while it was welcome the Consumer Council is mentioned as a source of advice, could more be done, particularly in terms of the wider impact of extended family?

Action: The Chief Executive advised outreach would prioritise accessing the wider family circle, offering advice and resources available from the Consumer Council and partners.

319/2.1

EU Exit: One Year On

Mr McDade advised the project involved 1,009 respondents from a quantitative survey and 11 focus groups with 88 consumers, carried out in late January and early February across 11 council areas of Northern Ireland. Headline findings were:

- Most participants agreed it was difficult to separate the impacts of EU Exit from other possible causes such as the COVID-19 pandemic, HGV driver shortages, rising world fuel prices and the escalating cost of shipping. Unsurprisingly, those who had voted leave were less likely to blame EU Exit for price rises or shortages in the shops, while those voting remain were more likely to blame EU Exit.

- Some participants expressed regret about their choice of vote in the referendum, largely because of increased prices since EU Exit and what they perceive to be broken promises made by politicians in the run up to the 2016 referendum. None of those who voted remain expressed regret at having done so, nor did any say that they would vote differently if asked to do so again.
- Most wanted the Northern Ireland Protocol issue resolved quickly and did not have strong views on how issues should be resolved other than a desire not to have a hard border on the island of Ireland, and many thought it had been over-politicised.
- Some reported difficulties in getting goods delivered to Northern Ireland from Great Britain (GB) with delivery charges increasing, suppliers who had previously supplied to Northern Ireland now refusing to transport goods here, and many thinking this was due to suppliers being unsure about the shipping and export rules might apply.
- Some had been charged extra for items delivered from GB and had paid assuming that the extra sum was required since EU Exit, and others had experienced requests for customs declarations when sending goods to the Republic of Ireland, or import duty payments for goods sent from Northern Ireland to some EU countries.
- All noticed price rises in the last year on items such as the weekly shop, travel, insurance, new and second-hand cars and fuel and while they did not blame EU Exit, they did see it as influencing most other price rises. They had also experienced shortages, particularly on supermarket shelves.
- Most were aware of longer delivery times since EU Exit and believed that this was leading to shorter shelf life for perishable goods, with some reporting fresh food had already perished by the time it was put on the shelves.
- Suspicion that suppliers and retailers were raising their prices to claw back losses sustained because of EU Exit or the pandemic, and consumers were moving away from big supermarket chains in favour of bargain shops.

A Member enquired if people understood the Northern Ireland Protocol. Mr McCoy advised most had not read it and opinion was shaped by the news or political stance.

The Director of Strategy and Emerging Markets advised the draft research report would first be shared with DfE GB and EU Trade Division for their approval, and agreement sought on how best to disseminate more widely.

The Deputy Chair thanked Mr McDade and Mr McCoy for their presentation.

319/2.3 Future of Transport

The Deputy Chair welcomed Richard Williams, Ms Hannah Brown and Ms Michelle Kelly to the meeting.

Mr Williams advised project involved a qualitative survey with six focus groups and a quantitative survey of 1,124 consumers. Headline findings were:

- Consumers believed the cost of transport would rise in the future and the majority believed financial responsibility for making transport more environmentally friendly lies with government.
- Public transport would be used more if routes were more flexible, and the whole transport network better connected and integrated.
- 61% of people would be more likely to buy an electric vehicle (EV) if a grant was available and the same percentage would use their car less if public transport was free or heavily subsidised.
- Awareness was low regarding concessionary fares for people with disabilities and Members felt that there was a duty for the Consumer Council to raise this.

Members also discussed the lack of taxis in the evening and Mr Williams advised that while late night public transport is limited, Translink is keen to do more in this space.

Mr Williams advised the research findings will be presented to Translink, the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) and DfE, and inform our future transport policy. He also advised the Department for Transport (DfT) consultation on reforming aviation consumer policy proposes lowering compensation levels and consumer protections for domestic UK flights, and the Consumer Council were preparing their response.

The Deputy Chair thanked everyone for their contribution.

Action: The Chief Executive advised promotional messaging on social media to highlight concessionary fares would be taken forward, in particular to vulnerable groups, and incorporated into the content for appropriate outreach activity.

3. ITEMS FOR APPROVAL

319/3.1 Presentation: Cost of Living Response

The Chief Executive advised following feedback from the April 2022 Board meeting, the Consumer Council has drafted a response on how the 2022-2023 Forward Work Programme could help mitigate the emerging cost-of-living crisis, mindful of available budgets, funder commitments and organisational capacity.

The presentation provided Board Members with a proposal on how forward plans could support consumers through the dual impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis, by Directorate. Two annexes provided: (i) the support measures for Consumer Council staff; and (ii) Consumer Council's briefing to the Department for Communities (DfC) on the energy price crisis.

Each Directorate presented individually to Members setting out key insights for research carried out in 2021-2022 and actions already undertaken or in planning for 2022-2023.

The 2022 Consumer Insight Survey highlighted increased detriment on many fronts, with growing concern about household finances, including home energy and car fuel costs leading to consumers cutting back on spending to pay rising bills. Alongside this,

analysis using CEBR data for October to December 2021, showed for the lowest earning households in Northern Ireland, gross household income grew by just £1, discretionary income fell by 21.5% and essential spending rose by 5.8%. The data also set out the proportion of income spent on household bills, food and alcoholic beverages and transport, by the highest and lowest earning households, households on social security benefits and households with consumers of pensionable age.

The discussion highlights that while the Chancellor’s package of support was welcome, there was concern that interventions and solutions available to financially vulnerable consumers in Northern Ireland are not the same as their GB counterparts.

The Chief Executive advised that while the Government had announced a £400 per household payment towards rising energy costs, it was unclear how and when this would be paid to consumers in Northern Ireland, given the current political impasse. It was agreed the Consumer Council would:

- Continue to use its research and data insights to influence policy to ease financial positions and advocate for regulation so markets treated consumers more fairly.
- Ensure its frontline services helped protect, educated and empowered consumers.
- Collaborated across Government and participated on relevant bodies and forums.

Members discussed that as so much of what is happening is out of our control, the corporate Risk Register should be amended to reflect this.

Action: The Chief Executive advised the risk rating for the relevant corporate risks on the 2022-2023 Corporate Risk Register would reflect this.

The Deputy Chair enquired how the Consumer Council was assessing whether banks and other financial institutions were treating consumers fairly in light of the current crisis.

A Member referred to the likely tidal wave of debt and could how consumers are treated by debt collectors be identified, and if the Consumer Council was aware of the Enforcement Conduct Board and was there was something similar in Northern Ireland.

Action: The Director of Financial Services advised he would follow up on what was being done to ensure consumers were being treated fairly by banks, and the Enforcement Conduct Board.

The Deputy Chair thanked everyone for their contribution.

Members approved the Cost-of-Living response.

GOVERNANCE

319/3.2

Performance and Corporate Governance Report

The Deputy Chair invited Mr Campbell to join the meeting.

Mr Campbell advised that the draft Performance and Corporate Governance Report, part of the 2021-2022 Annual Report and Accounts, was a live document as discussions taking place with the external auditors on an almost daily basis.

He advised the draft would be presented to the ARAC Committee in June, and then the full 2021-2022 Annual Report and Accounts presented at the July Board meeting for approval. He added that a good working relationship had been developed with the new external auditors, Ross Boyd.

A Member enquired as to why the Chair was only showing as attending one out of five ARAC meetings. The Chief Executive advised that the Chair had attended one ARAC meeting at the invitation of the ARAC Chair.

Action: The Chief Executive advised a note would be added to the meeting schedule stating the Chair had attended one ARAC meeting at the invitation of the ARAC Chair.

Members approved the draft Performance and Corporate Governance Report for the ARAC meeting on 14 June.

319/3.3

HR Report: April 2022

The Director of Corporate Services advised the HR Report would be presented at each Board meeting. He highlighted the following:

- In 2021-2022 the Consumer Council spent £92,000 on learning and development which equated to an investment of £1,600 per person.
- The sickness absence rate was at 2.03% against a target of 4.5%.
- The People Strategy would be included in the 2022-2023 Corporate Scorecard.
- A new Hybrid Working Policy was under development ready for presentation at the ARAC meeting on 14 June, following by the Remuneration Committee on 17 June. In parallel, the policy would be reviewed by NIPSA.
- Accreditations cost the Consumer Council between £24,000 and £25,000 per year, and most were vital to the organisation, there was an opportunity for some streamlining, which would be completed in Q2 2022-2023.

A Member enquired if mandatory staff training, such as cyber security, was captured. Members stressed the importance of noting and tracking this from an audit perspective.

Mr Warke advised mandatory cyber security training was completed annually by staff and included within the new staff induction.

Action: The Chief Executive advised that details of mandatory training completed now be included within the HR Report.

Members approved the HR Report: April 2022.

4. ITEMS FOR NOTING

319/4.1 CEO Report: May 2022

Members noted the update.

5. REVIEW OF THE MEETING

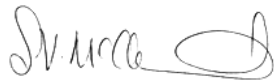
319/5.1 Review of the Meeting

The Chair thanked everyone for attending and presenting their reports and finished the meeting at 1.40pm. The meeting continued in CLOSED SESSION until 2.00pm.

6. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

319/6.1 The next meeting will be held on Friday 1 July 2022 at 10am, venue to be confirmed.

Signed

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. M. O.', written in a cursive style.

Date

1 July 2022