

**THREE HUNDRED AND SEVENTEENTH MEETING OF THE GENERAL CONSUMER COUNCIL FOR  
NORTHERN IRELAND HELD ON FRIDAY 4 MARCH 2022 AT 10.00AM IN GRAND CENTRAL HOTEL,  
BEDFORD STREET, BELFAST  
AND VIA ZOOM TELECONFERENCE**

**317/1.1**

**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 William Leathem	Board Member
Mr Gerry McCurdy	Board Member
Ms Amanda Logan	Board Member
Mr Alan O'Neill	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 (for part)	Head of Finance and Governance
Mr Matt Stevenson (for part)	Head of Strategy and Emerging Markets
Ms Philippa McKeown (for part)	Head of Food Policy and Emerging Markets
Ms Bernie Tolan	PA to Chief Executive
Ms Julie Coulter	Administrative Officer

**APOLOGIES**

No apologies recorded.

The Board Meeting began in CLOSED SESSION at 9.00am and resumed at 10.00am with the Chair inviting the Senior Leadership Team to join the meeting.

The Chair advised Consumer Council Officers would join the Board Meeting when invited to present their respective agenda items and then leave the meeting, with only SLT staying for the duration of the meeting.

Dr Joan Martin left the meeting at 10.00am

**317/1.2**

**Declaration of Conflict of Interest**

The 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.

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

No Board Members declared a conflict of interest on any agenda item.

**317/1.3** **Minutes of the last meeting**

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 28 January 2022, having been circulated, were agreed as a true and correct record with the following amendment:

Attendance of Mr Alan O'Neill to be recorded.

The Minutes were agreed and signed.

**317/1.4** **Actions from the last meeting**

The Chief Executive updated Members on the following items:

- 316/3.1: Discussions with NI Direct for a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with tailored service standards for the Consumer Council is ongoing.
- 316/3.2: The pilot of the new Corporate Risk Register template will be reviewed in Q1 2022-2023, and this will include developing a proportionate methodology to monitor, record and manage Directorate risks.
- 316/3.4: A discussion to ensure the 2022-2023 Forward Work Programme is aligned to the strategic priorities of the organisation will be planned for 25 March 2022, with a particular focus on research projects.
- 316/3.4: The Office of National Statistics has confirmed that they will not amend their methodology for the experimental Consumer Price Index for Northern Ireland, but consideration will be given to better reflect the impacts of cost of living crisis as part of a UK-wide update in due course.
- 316/4.3: The Consumer Council has secured a larger stand in the Food Hall for 2022 Balmoral Show with plans underway for ensuring additional resources covering both staff and materials.

Mr McCurdy requested future Action Reports be streamlined to only include current and outstanding actions. The Chief Executive agreed with this request.

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

**317/1.5** **Matters Arising**

Mr Leatham offered his apologies for his sudden departure from the virtual Board Meeting on 28 January 2022, due to a power failure at his home.

## 2. PRESENTATION

### 317/2 The Northern Ireland Economy beyond COVID

The Chair welcomed Mr Andrew Webb from Grant Thornton to the Board Meeting. Mr Webb advised that whilst the economic environment is fast changing, and the Northern Ireland economy has bounced back quicker than expected with economic output at a 13-year high, there is a fear that inflation could take hold with rapidly rising energy costs and on-going supply chain issues.

He said that the skills shortage could be the biggest factor in derailing economic growth, and stressed the importance of clear communication channels to understand employers' needs leading to better skills delivery from courses that are fit for purpose. He referred to long standing local issues around productivity, infrastructure and deprivation that pre-date the COVID-19 pandemic and said better targeting and streamlining of resources in the approach to these issues would improve the overall outcome. He believes the government will have to change its energy policy and the levers it uses in the economy.

Mr McCurdy enquired about the 'Green Environment', and Mr Webb advised that the Belfast Road Map proposed spending envelope of c£5 billion, with significant potential for new jobs, business development and infrastructure projects for the local economy.

Members discussed consumer detriment and local inflation levels, and their impacts on disposable income. There was concern about the levels of unsecured debt here, meaning that consumers are more exposed to risk. Mr Webb referred to the high dependence on public spending in Northern Ireland, and said Grant Thornton would be monitoring this over the coming months.

The Chair thanked Mr Webb for his presentation.

## 3. ITEMS FOR APPROVAL

### GOVERNANCE

#### 317/3.1 2021-2022 Corporate Scorecard: April to January

The Chief Executive reported at the end of January 2022, there are a number of indicators under the performance quadrant that are showing a RAG status of greater than 30% target, or between 20% and 30% below target. This is due to the Q4 figure covering activity in January 2022 only against the three-month Q4 Forecast. The following indicators will not meet their annual target:

- 3a, 3b, 3c: This is a result of the cumulative impact of reduced service standards across all NI Direct targets.
- 4, 4b, 4c and 6a: This is due to capacity issues at senior level in the HR Team.

The following indicators may not meet their annual target:

- Indicator 5: The 2-star score in the Best Companies Survey is unlikely to be maintained due to challenges of remote working, increased demand on work-life balance, staff attrition, new appointments, dependency of agency staff and vacant roles in 2021.
- Indicator 6: While the staff absenteeism level has improved since December 2021, the 4.5% target is unlikely to be met.
- Indicator 7: The management of annual expenditure to within the agreed 1% tolerance may not be met due to slippage as a result of procurement competitions.
- Indicator 10: Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the target of accessibility and complaints audits may not be met.

Discussion followed regarding ongoing issues with service standards provided by NI Direct. The Chief Executive advised the MOU with NI Direct adopted a standard template for all Departments and Arms-Length Bodies (ALBs), and if was proving difficult to secure commitment for a more tailored approach, despite widespread acknowledgment that the Consumer Council's experience was not unique.

She also confirmed the possibility of breaking away from NI Direct had not yet been explored and would raise with DfE Sponsor Branch.

It was agreed that where possible, future communication and press releases will highlight the Consumer Council office telephone number, and not the 0800 number.

Mr McCurdy suggested the quality of NI Direct's scripts and responses are monitored alongside meeting agreed standards of service targets. The Chief Executive agreed this would be explored.

Mr McAteer highlighted the breadth of projects and the successes achieved, and asked the Board's appreciation be passed to the teams responsible.

Members approved the 2021-2022 Corporate Scorecard: April to January

### **317/3.2**

#### **Management Accounts: January 2022**

The Head of Finance and Governance gave Members an overview of the management accounts for January 2022, and highlighted that the majority of the Consumer Council's expenditure was weighted towards Q3 and Q4.

The Chief Executive confirmed moving forward a 12-month 2022-2023 budget profile will be prepared for Board, and activity will be planned across all four quarters to ensure greater monitoring, management and transparency of expenditure.

Mr Campbell advised of the additional pressures of spending allocated budgets due to the ERAP funding, stressed the importance of surrendering monies in a timely manner during in-year Monitoring Rounds. Using actual outturn figures for April to January and estimated expenditure for February and March, using a combination of historical data for operating costs and projected work programme commitments from each

Directorate, he informed the organisation is on target to meet the 1% tolerance at the end of March 2022.

Members approved Management Accounts: January 2022

## **FORWARD PLANNING**

### **317/3.3**

#### **2022-2023 Draft Budget**

The Chief Executive advised that in the absence of a First and deputy First Minister, the 2022-2023 budget for NI Executive Departments cannot be approved until after the Assembly elections in May. The Department of Finance will advise all Departments and their ALBs on the planning envelope available until there is an Executive, and this will include quarterly thresholds as a proportion of overall annual allocations.

Should this happen, she advised the Consumer Council would manage expenditure by protecting salaries and prioritising work programme outputs accordingly. She also confirmed the new methodology for the apportionment of shared costs had been endorsed by all funders, who welcomed the transparent and consistent approach.

The Chair said that there had been issues with the budgeting exercise which had meant that earlier submissions to the Department for the Economy included an element of double counting.

This had been identified through scrutiny by the Remuneration Committee. The latest figures included in the papers had been considered by the Remuneration Committee and the Sponsor Branch and all were content with the profile of requests.

Members were advised Consumer Council's capital allocation would be addressed through a separate in-year bid once there was greater clarity of the budget required for a new customer relationship management (CRM) platform and content management system (CMS).

There was a discussion of the organisation's ability to absorb a potential 5% cut in funding, and Mr Campbell advised the Consumer Council had the capacity to do this by scaling back its 2022-2023 Forward Work Programme.

The Chair advised that discussion around further rationalisation or new emerging consumer priorities, such as the increased cost of home heating oil would take place at the Board session planned for 25 March.

Members requested an updated Organisational Chart with staff photographs. The Chief Executive agreed this would be actioned.

Members approved 2022-2023 Draft Budget.

## **4.**

### **ITEMS FOR NOTING**

#### **317/4.1**

#### **Departmental Presentation: Strategy and Emerging Markets**

Ms Murphy explained the role of the Directorate and the strategic context shaping the work programme such as the cost of living crisis and rising food costs against the backdrop of the Northern Ireland Protocol, supply chain issues and higher energy costs. She also set out the wide-ranging stakeholder relationships the team was responsible for, covering EU Exit and food policy, and their impact emerging consumer issues.

Ms McKeown-Brown and Mr Stevenson advised Members of the work of the Directorate covering research projects, data gathering, stakeholder engagement and consumer monitoring. This included capitalising the consumer intelligence data collected by the organisation, analysing trends over time using a Consumer Monitoring Dashboard, and the establishment of a Northern Ireland Consumer Price Index.

Members asked how the Dashboard would be socialised and whether it would be made accessible to other organisations, given the potential risk of the data being misused. The Chief Executive advised of that certain elements of the Dashboard would be shared widely but potentially more sensitive findings would be discussed with relevant stakeholders, potentially on a one-to-one and/or confidential basis.

Mr McAteer highlighted the number of outputs and emphasised the importance of showing outcomes of what is being delivered. He said traditional interventions would have limited impact in the current climate and stressed the importance of working with stakeholders to proactively influence policy change that would have a positive impact on consumer, giving the example of the banking industry.

Members noted the Departmental Presentation: Strategy and Emerging Markets.

**317/4.2**      **CEO Report: March 2022**

Members noted the update.

**317/4.3**      **Consumer Council Podcast Series**

Members remarked on the amount of work this potential project would involve, and queried if it was likely to reach the target audience. The Chief Executive confirmed that this would be a pilot started on a pilot basis, with capacity requirements and audience reach review before taking forward on a permanent basis.

Mr McCurdy queried if he could share the paper with the Charity Commission and it was agreed that the Head of Communication would discuss this with him.

It was agreed the paper would be discussed offline and brought back to Board for consideration at a later date.

**317/4.4**      **2021-2022 Payroll Audit: Verbal Update**

The Chief Executive advised that a satisfactory opinion had been received, and this had been communicated to DfE Sponsor Branch and the Northern Ireland Audit Office.

It was agreed that the final 2021-2022 Payroll Audit Report would be shared with Members.

Members noted the update.

**317/4.5**      **EU Exit Impact Interim Findings: Presentation**

It was agreed that due to time constraints the presentation by Social Media Research would be an agenda item at a future meeting.

**5.**            **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

**317/5.1**      **Review of the Meeting**

The Board Members reported that the papers, presentations and meeting had been informative. The Chair closed the meeting at 1.25pm and invited Board Members and Officers to the lunch and familiarisation session with all staff.

**6.**            **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

**317/6.1**      The next meeting will be held on Friday 22 April 2022 at 10am, venue to be confirmed.

**Signed**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. W. ...', written over a horizontal line.

**Date**

22 April 2022