

**THREE HUNDRED AND FOURTEENTH MEETING OF THE GENERAL CONSUMER COUNCIL FOR NORTHERN  
IRELAND HELD ON FRIDAY 26 NOVEMBER 2021 AT 10.00AM IN SEATEM HOUSE, BELFAST  
AND VIA ZOOM TELECONFERENCE**

314/1.1

**ATTENDANCE**

Ms Sheila McClelland	Chair
Mr Mick McAteer	Deputy Chair
Mrs June Butler	
Mrs Lynne Crowther	
Dr Sinéad Furey	
Mr William Leathem	
Dr Joan Martin	
Mr Gerry McCurdy	

**BY INVITATION**

Professor David Phinnemore	Queen's University, Belfast
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**IN ATTENDANCE**

Ms Noyona Chundur	Chief Executive Officer
Mr Scott Kennerley	Director of Financial and Postal Services
Mr Peter McClenaghan	Director of Infrastructure and Sustainability
Ms Anne Marie Murphy	Director of Strategy and Emerging Markets
Mr Terry Campbell	Interim Head of Finance
Ms Sharon Doherty	Head of Communication and Outreach
Mr Michael Legg	Head of Postal Services
Mr Graham Smith	Head of Water
Mr Richard Williams	Head of Transport
Mr Raymond Gormley	Head of Energy
Mr Matthew Stevenson	Head of Strategy and Emerging Markets
Ms Bernie Tolan	Personal Assistant
Ms Julie Coulter	Administrative Officer

**APOLOGIES**

Apologies were received from Mr Alan O'Neill and Ms Amanda Logan.

314/1.2

**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.

314/1.3 **MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING**

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 15 October 2021, having been circulated, were agreed as a true and correct record.

The Minutes were agreed and signed.

314/1.4 **ACTIONS FROM THE LAST MEETING**

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

314/1.5 **MATTERS ARISING**

There were no matters arising.

314/1.6 **CHAIR'S VERBAL UPDATE**

The Chair welcomed the Director of Strategy and Emerging Markets to her first Board meeting.

The Chair advised following the November Oversight and Liaison (O&L) meeting with the Department for the Economy (DfE), £520k was returned from the one-year ring-fenced Economic Recovery Action Plan (ERAP) and capital allocations. This would ensure a more consolidated funding structure to meet the annual outturn tolerance target.

Members were advised of the recruitment schedule, with competitions underway for Senior Policy and Research Officers, a Communications Officer and an Office Manager, with merit lists created to fill future vacancies.

Members were also advised of the long-term absence of the Director of Corporate Services due to ill health and the recruitment of an interim HR Business Partner (Staff Officer) to support the HR team deliver its forward work programme.

Mr Gerry McCurdy highlighted the need for mitigations for ensure operational capacity.

It was agreed the Corporate Risk Register for Q3 2021-2022 would reflect this update.

2. **PRESENTATION**

**The Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland: Where are We and What's Next?**

Professor David Phinnemore talked Members through attitudes towards the NI Protocol from the polling data collected by Queen's University's 'Testing the Temperature' surveys. This covered opinions towards the NI Protocol, views on its impact and priority concerns, as well as next steps in the negotiations between the UK and the EU.

Members discussed the issues and thanked Professor Phinnemore for his presentation.

It was agreed the presentation would be circulated to Members.

### 3. ITEMS FOR APPROVAL

#### 314/3.1 2022-2023 Business Planning Presentations

Members were briefed on the business planning process for 2022-2023 for the Infrastructure and Sustainability, Financial and Postal Services and Strategy and Emerging Markets Directorates, and invited to provide comment on the draft proposals, which included analysis of the external environment, strategic landscape and SWOT.

Members highlighted the importance and influence the Northern Ireland Energy Strategy 2050 has on future plans and statutory mechanisms, alongside alignment with DfE's 10X Strategy and other relevant strategies from the Northern Ireland Executive.

The Chair highlighted the importance of a stable operating model to meet the ambitions for 2022-2023, supported by capacity building measures, prioritisation of projects and rationalisation of outcomes.

Mrs Lynne Crowther highlighted the importance for commensurate resources to deliver the proposals and for staff to be adequately supported to deliver additional projects.

#### Infrastructure and Sustainability

The Director of Infrastructure and Sustainability provided an overview of the existing consumer risks, emerging themes and associated risks for the Directorate, before presenting proposals for the 2022-2023 Forward Work Programme from the energy, transport and water teams.

Members highlighted the importance of:

- Collating data across markets to develop insights into consumer behaviours, impacts on consumer protections, and understanding the cost of energy transition and how these could be balanced between government, industry and households.
- Prioritising partnership working with strategic stakeholders in the public sector, academia and regulators who sit outside of the Consumer Council's statutory remit.
- Sustainability to underpin all work, connecting corporate ambition to strategy development, independent accreditations and consumer outcomes.
- Reviewing the taxi market in Northern Ireland given market monopolies, labour shortage and fare structures.
- Organisational capacity to be involved in policy development with key stakeholders at an early stage and at a strategic level.
- Being a key influencer at the numerous price controls planned for 2022-2023.

The Chief Executive advised the organisation had retained its 'Green' level accreditation in the Northern Ireland Environmental Benchmarking Survey from Business in the

Community, and that sustainability would be a key consideration when developing the hybrid working model for the organisation.

#### Financial and Postal Services

The Director of Financial and Postal Services provided an overview of the existing consumer risks, emerging themes and associated risks for the Directorate, before presenting proposals for the 2022-2023 Forward Work Programme from the financial and postal services teams.

Members were advised the anticipated telecoms advocacy role has not yet received Ministerial approval but the Consumer Council is meeting the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in December for an update.

Members highlighted the importance of:

- Being mindful future consumer and competition policy prioritised consumer need.
- Preserving consumer protections, regulatory standards improved and the independence of the Financial Conduct Authority maintained in the consultation response to the UK Government's Future Regulatory Framework (FRF) Review.
- Collating data across markets to develop insights into the impact of digitalisation on consumer behaviours, protections and if current regulations are fit for purpose.
- Greater understanding of criteria to close Post Office branches and the emerging risk of small businesses no longer able to locate these within their premises.

It was agreed the consultation response to the UK Government's FRF Review will be taken forward with Mr Mick McAteer.

It was agreed the criteria for closing Post Office branches will be shared with Members.

#### Strategy and Emerging Markets

The Director of Strategy and Emerging Markets provided an overview of the existing consumer risks, emerging themes and associated risks for the Directorate, before presenting proposals for the 2022-2023 Forward Work Programme from the EU Exit and Food Policy teams.

Members highlighted the importance of:

- A robust strategy to communicate research findings, consistently delivering data integrity and partnership working with credible partners.
- Highlighting the differences in the Northern Ireland consumer landscape and the lack of region-specific insight into consumer behaviours, particularly changes in behaviour since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Understanding the cost to society of building resilience following the COVID-19 pandemic, including the balance of household and industry contributions, and the risks this could generate for the Consumer Council.
- Stronger relationships with enforcement agencies and other regional and national stakeholders, including better data sharing at a localised level.
- Scoping online harms by the type, markets and business practices leading to them.

Members agreed that while greater operational capacity meant more projects, those that delivered the greatest consumer impact should be prioritised.

The Chief Executive advised that the organisation would have completed its 12-month recruitment schedule by end March 2022 and be more stable in relation to staffing levels, with 2022-2023 Business Cases seeking to increase permanent funding.

It was agreed Mr Mick McAteer would share information relating to online harms.

Members advised they were content with the approach adopted in the business planning exercise and for the 2022-2023 Business Cases to be based on this.

Members approved the 2022-2023 Business Planning Presentations.

314/3.2

#### Management Accounts: October 2021

Members were advised that while there was a £218k underspend, plans were in place to ensure the year-end outturn would meet the 1% tolerance target.

Salary slippage continued to impact underspend despite recruitment throughout Quarters 1, 2 and 3, with more planned for Quarter 4. Capacity is being further increased through agency staff contracted to March 2022 to complete ring-fenced projects within the NI Protocol and ERAP bids.

As part of the January Monitoring Round, the one-year ring-fenced ERAP allocation was reduced from £415k from £909k, resulting in a surrender of £494k. The balance of £26k was from the capital allocation.

Members approved the Management Accounts: October 2021.

Mr William Leathem left the meeting.

314/3.3

#### Draft CCNI-DfE Partnership Agreement

The Chief Executive advised the draft Partnership Agreement replaced the current Management Statement and Financial Memorandum (MSFM).

The Partnership Agreement sets out the Consumer Council's aims, objectives, outcomes and governance framework to support the Northern Ireland Executive's wider strategic aims in its Programme for Government and Departmental strategies and policies.

She advised that the Partnership Agreement would be reviewed internally with DfE Sponsor Branch on an annual basis, with an independent external review would be carried out every four years.

Members commented what while the Partnership Agreement set out the transactional relationship, it lacked a partnership approach and recognition of the Consumer Council's independence and the role of its Chair and Board.

The Chief Executive advised the final document would be brought back to Board following approval from DfE.

Members approved the Draft CCNI-DfE Partnership Agreement.

4. **ITEMS FOR NOTING**

314/4.1 Chief Executive's Report: October 2021

The Chief Executive presented the Chief Executive's Report to Board Members and highlighted the key activity across all Directorates.

Members noted the Chief Executive's Report.

314/4.2 2021-2022 Research Projects

Members were advised a total of 36 research projects would be undertaken in 2021-2022, with all planned procurements on track to deliver project outputs by March 2022.

Members noted the paper.

314/4.3 Stakeholder Engagement Strategy Update

Members were advised the operational reporting tool to record stakeholder engagement had been updated to balance data collection with monitoring significant changes in stakeholder relationships.

Members noted the paper.

314/4.4 Consumer Week 2022

Members welcomed that learnings from the 2021 event had been incorporated into the plans for Consumer Week 2022.

Members noted the update and approved the Consumer Champions concept.

Members to send feedback on ideas for 2022 to Chief Executive and Sharon Doherty.

5. **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

A Member reported that the fire doors at the entrance of the toilets were heavy and difficult to open for a disabled person.

It was agreed this would be investigated by the Premises Officer with the building landlord, the Department of Finance.

6. **REVIEW OF THE MEETING**

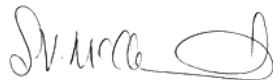
The Board Members were content with the standard of papers and contribution made. Board Members asked for a timed Agenda going forward.

**DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting will be held on Tuesday 21 December 2021 at 10am via Zoom.

There was no further business and the meeting closed at 1.20pm.

Signed

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

Date                      21 December 2021