

**THREE HUNDRED AND TWENTIETH MEETING OF THE GENERAL CONSUMER COUNCIL FOR
NORTHERN IRELAND HELD ON FRIDAY 1 JULY 2022 AT 10.00AM IN SEATEM HOUSE, ALFRED
STREET, BELFAST, AND VIA ZOOM TELECONFERENCE**

ATTENDANCE

Ms Sheila McClelland	Chair
Mr Mick McAteer	Deputy Chair
Dr Sinéad Furey	Board Member
Ms Amanda Logan	Board Member
Mr Gerry McCurdy	Board Member
Mr Alan O'Neill	Board Member
Mr William Leathem (for part)	Board Member
Dr Joan Martin (for part)	Board Member
Ms Noyona Chundur	Chief Executive
Ms Dervla Kearney	Director of Consumer Empowerment
Mr Peter McClenaghan	Director of Infrastructure and Sustainability
Mr Scott Kennerley	Director of Financial and Postal Services
Mr William Warke	Director of Corporate Services
Ms Julie Coulter	Administrative Officer
Ms Fiona Norman	FN Research

APOLOGIES

Mrs June Butler	Board Member
Mrs Lynne Crowther	Board Member
Ms Anne-Marie Murphy	Director of Strategy and Emerging Markets
Mr Terry Campbell	Head of Finance and Governance
Ms Bernie Tolan	PA to Chief Executive

320/1.1

Research Presentation: Consumers' Attitudes to Sustainability

The Chair introduced Fiona Norman from FN Research. Ms Norman presented the qualitative research carried out on behalf of the Consumer Council, where 827 people aged 18+, a representative sample of population, completed a telephone survey during February and March 2022. The survey explored consumer attitudes in three areas: awareness of sustainability, government action and public behaviour.

The research concluded while general awareness of sustainability aspects was high, there was less knowledge of social and governance aspects and activities related to reduced consumption of meat and animal products and ethical awareness were not as evident. Key factors preventing a sustainable lifestyle were lack of information, financial restrictions, the current economic situation and lack of local government leadership. Despite this, consumers were willing to pay more for goods and services to ensure brand commitment to environmentally sustainable and ethical activities. However, it was clear that investment in better education and support for sustainable activities would help.

Mr William Leathem joined the meeting at 10.10am.

Members highlighted more detailed qualitative research would be needed to identify consumers' appetite to pay towards sustainability, especially for more expensive items such as home insulation. They also noted food and water wastage had been omitted from the study.

The Chief Executive advised attitudes towards food wastage could be covered in future consumer pulse surveys or focus groups, and there were plans to undertake water wastage research later in the year.

Ms Amanda Logan advised the draft cross-departmental Waste Strategy would be completed by December 2022.

Members suggested connecting with Health Trusts and the Education Authority, and discussed examples of good practice in the private sector.

Members noted the presentation.

Action: Director of Infrastructure and Sustainability to contact his counterparts in relevant Health Trusts and the Education Authority to find out about their approach to sustainability as large energy users.

320/2.1 Apologies

Apologies were noted from Mrs June Butler and Mrs Lynne Crowther and that Dr Joan Martin would join the meeting later.

320/2.2 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 could reflect this.

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

No conflict of interest was declared, and this was noted.

320/2.2 Minutes of the last meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 27 May 2022, having been circulated, were agreed as a true and correct record.

The Minutes were agreed by Members and signed.

320/2.2 Actions from the last meeting

The Chief Executive updated the Members on the following:

- Outreach activity will aim to reach the wider family circle by sharing advice and resources from the Consumer Council.

- Promotional messaging on concessionary fares will be incorporated into the Summer Travel campaign, as well as into outreach content.
- The Consumer Council has contacted the Financial Conduct Authority to highlight the importance of fair treatment of consumers by banks and other financial institutions during the cost of living crisis.
- Contact was made with the Enforcement Conduct Board (ECB) which advised its remit covered England and Wales but there was nothing similar for Northern Ireland. It was agreed the ECB and Consumer Council would continue the dialogue to better understand how to support consumers. It was agreed to contact Consumer Scotland to discuss any potential issues with bailiffs.
- The 2022 Consumer Insight Survey would be shared with the Utility Regulator.
- The Department for the Economy (DfE) Permanent Secretary, Mike Brennan, and the Department of Finance (DoF) Permanent Secretary, Neil Gibson, have confirmed their attendance for the Board Strategy Day in August.

The Actions from the last meeting were noted by Members.

Action: Director of Financial and Postal Services to contact Consumer Scotland to see if there are any potential issues with bailiffs given the cost of living crisis.

320/2.6

Chair's Business

The Chair highlighted the need for a better way to manage research presentations. It was agreed the slide deck would be issued with the Board Pack, and include an executive summary and strategic implications. The presentation would be 10mins long and only highlight key points and findings, and assume the supporting document had been read, with the majority of the time focusing on discussion.

To maximise the time available, Members suggested the Chair meet with the Senior Leadership Team before each Board meeting to discuss any pertinent issues.

Members approved the creation of a Policy and Research Advisory Group to discuss key research and policy themes in more detail. It was agreed the terms of reference for the Group would be discussed at the Board Strategy Day.

Action: The structure of research presentations brought to Board meetings would cover a 10-mins slide deck highlighting key points and findings, with 20-mins allocated for questions and discussion.

Action: Chief Executive to draft terms of reference for the Policy and Research Advisory Group for consideration at the Board Strategy Day.

3.

ITEMS FOR APPROVAL

320/3.1

2021-2022 Annual Report and Accounts and Draft 2021-2022 Report to Those Charged With Governance

The Chair noted the paper has been approved by the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) in June.

The Chief Executive advised the Consumer Council had received a satisfactory audit opinion and unqualified annual accounts from the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO), which were due to be certified in July/August. In the coming year, the organisation would focus on NIAO feedback and strengthen existing processes to achieve closer alignment with the Government Financial Reporting Manual (FRM).

Members approved the 2021-2022 Annual Report and Accounts and Draft 2021-2022 Report to Those Charged With Governance.

320/3.2

Management Accounts: May 2022

The Director of Corporate Services advised while the overall opening allocation from DfE had dropped by £51k due to the removal of the COVID allocation across the system, funding for the Consumer Council had increased by £47k on the previous year to £4.3m.

He confirmed there would be no June Monitoring Round and monthly budget profiles would be completed for every team to ensure expenditure was ongoing throughout the financial year, instead of the last quarter.

He also highlighted that while payroll had increased compared to 2021-2022, this was the result of most vacancies now being filled and the Consumer Council being in a more stable position with fewer agency staff.

Members queried if having a single bank account for all transactions posed a risk, and were content this was not a significant issue.

Members approved the Management Accounts: May 2022.

320/3.3

Draft Hybrid Working Policy

The Director of Corporate Services briefed Members on the draft policy, which would be kept under review, particularly in relation to developments from the COVID-19 pandemic and cost of living crisis.

He advised the policy proposed staff work from the office at least two of the five days per week, and this was already happening informally across the organisation. DfE had confirmed the policy would work within existing contractual arrangements, and if staff used the proposed Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) Hubs, the days would not count towards a day in the office.

IT Assist had been asked to scope out the technical requirements to facilitate the formal transition to hybrid working, and this was expected to be completed by the start of third quarter given the backlog of requests from across the civil service. The policy was currently being considered by NIPSA, and following their endorsement, would be formally launched.

The Chief Executive highlighted the new policy would be reviewed by DfE Internal Audit next year, and there be an impact on other corporate policies such the Security Policy and Business Continuity Plan.

The Director of Infrastructure and Sustainability highlighted the importance of staff continuing face-to-face stakeholder engagement, and that this was an area the Consumer Council would monitor to ensure good relations were maintained.

The Director of Corporate Services also confirmed flu vaccinations would be offered to all staff this year.

Members highlighted the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) was considering issuing public transport passes to employees.

Members approved the Draft Hybrid Working Policy.

Action: Director of Corporate Services to seek further information from DAERA whether employees would receive public transport passes.

320/3.4 **HR Report: May 2022**

The Director of Corporate Services briefed Members on HR Report for May, highlighting the Consumer Council now had 56 approved posts with recruitment underway for two EO1 posts for the Consumer Protection and Energy Teams.

Members were advised the 2021-2022 NICS sickness absence rate was 5.6% at a cost of £38m, while the Consumer Council's outturn was 4.33% with three long-term absences factored in for three staff. Members commended this achievement.

He also advised the Learning and Development Framework and People Strategy would now be completed in Q2 and Q3 respectively, and that while overtime would be offered in exceptional circumstances if prior approval in place, the accepted norm was time off in lieu.

Members approved the HR Report: May 2022.

4. **ITEMS FOR NOTING**

320/4.1 **CEO Report: June 2022**

The Chief Executive introduced the CEO Report for June.

Discussion focused on the Consumer Council instigating its Unreasonable Behaviour Policy, reviewed by the NIPSA representative and Director of Corporate Services, against a consumer following engagement since April. Confidential advice had been sought from Samaritans NI on the approach adopted by the organisation in relation to unreasonable behaviour from citizens contacting their helpline.

Members also discussed the UK Government's reforms to the Solvency II Directive, which sets out the regulatory requirements for insurance firms and groups, and how this reduced consumer protection in the sector.

Members noted the CEO Report: June 2022

Dr Joan Martin joined the meeting at 12.00 noon.

Action: Director of Financial and Postal Services to discuss the impact of the reforms to the Solvency II Directive with Mr Mick McAteer.

5. ITEMS FOR INFORMATION

320/5.1 Draft 2022-2023 Corporate Scorecard Template

The Chief Executive introduced the new 2022-2023 Corporate Scorecard split into four categories: customer, people, process and performance. A total of 34 indicators had been identified and the template comprised of a dashboard and all c81 projects approved in the 2022-2023 Forward Work Programme mapped against one of the 34 indicators, by RAG status.

Members noted the Draft 2022-2023 Corporate Scorecard Template.

320/5.2 April to May 2022 Corporate Risk Register

The Chief Executive introduced the April to May 2022 Corporate Risk Register, approved at the June ARAC meeting, advising that the template used in 2021-2022 would continue in 2022-2023 until the Consumer Council completed its programme of work to update its risk management policy and risk register. This would begin with a corporate governance and risk management training session with Senior and Wider Leadership Teams in Q2.

Mr Gerry McCurdy highlighted the need to capture the right risk appetite for each risk on the corporate risk register as part of the review process.

Members noted the April to May 2022 Corporate Risk Register.

Action: The Chief Executive to discuss the appropriate risk appetite with Mr Gerry McCurdy as part of the Consumer Council's review of risk management.

320/5.3 June 2022 ARAC Papers

Members noted the June 2022 ARAC Papers.

320/5.4 Consumer Journey Parcels Report

The Postal Services Team briefed Members on a series of consumer journeys on parcel operator websites to explore the key issues affecting consumers, and inform the best practice guide for parcel operators.

Members noted the Consumer Journey Parcels Report.

The Chair thanks staff for their contributions and presentations.

Mr William Leatham left the meeting at 12.15pm.

The meeting continued in CLOSED SESSION with Members, the Chief Executive and Director of Corporate Services.

6. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

320/6.1 Closed Session: 2022 Best Companies Survey

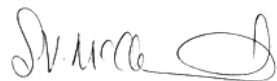
320/6.2 Review of the Meeting

DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

The Board Strategy Day will take place on Wednesday 24 August at a location to be determined, with teleconferencing facilities also available.

The next Board meeting will be held on Friday 30 September 2022 at 10am in Seatem House, with teleconferencing facilities also available.

Signed

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. M. ...', with a large, stylized flourish at the end.

Date

30 September 2022