

**TWO HUNDRED AND THIRTY- NINTH MEETING OF THE GENERAL
CONSUMER COUNCIL FOR NORTHERN IRELAND HELD AT
ELIZABETH HOUSE, 116 HOLYWOOD ROAD, BELFAST, BT4 1NY, ON
WEDNESDAY 22 FEBRUARY 2012 AT 10.30 A.M.**

239/1

ATTENDANCE

Mr Rick Hill Chairperson
Mr David Beattie
Mr Colm Bradley
Mrs Deirdre Fitzpatrick
Mr David Galloway
Mrs Jill Gillespie
Mrs Sarah Havlin
Mrs Mandy Patrick
Mr Sam Snodden
Mr Lee Wilson

IN ATTENDANCE

Ms Antoinette McKeown	Chief Executive
Mrs Carol Edwards	Head of Consumer Education
Mrs Loretta Daly	Head of Consumer Support (for part of the meeting)
Mrs Keelin Kelly	Head of Communications
Mr Scott Kennerley	Head of Transport
Mrs Julie McCurley	Head of Money Affairs (for part of the meeting)
Ms Donna Magee	Head of Finance and HR
Mr Aodhan O'Donnell	Director of Policy and Education
Ms Elaine Topping	Director of Corporate and Consumer Services
Mrs Rhonda Allen	Senior Support Officer

APOLOGIES

Mr Kit Chivers
Dr Margaret Ward

239/2

CHAIRPERSON'S BUSINESS

239/2.1

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The Chairperson advised members that any conflict of interest relating to agenda items should be recorded at the beginning of

Council meetings. Should a member have a conflict of interest they should leave the meeting at that particular agenda item and the minutes would reflect this.

He explained that the Chairperson would have the ability to define a conflict of interest and request members' compliance if this arose.

The Chairperson informed members that given his position as Chair of Consumer Focus Post NI (CFPNI) he would leave the meeting during any discussions in relation to the proposed transfer of CFPNI to the Council and Mandy Patrick would take the Chair.

No other members declared a conflict of interest on any agenda item.

239/2.2 Appointments to Committees

239/2.2.1 The Chairperson advised that as the Council and Committee structure review was not yet complete he had decided not to appoint a Convenor and supporting member to the Utilities and Transport Policy Committee at this time. He would take up the position of Interim Convenor for now.

Members were also advised that the support position to the Convenor of the Consumer Education and Money Affairs Committee was coming to an end on 23 February 2012. The Chairperson had decided that this appointment would run until the review had been completed.

239/2.2.2 The Chairperson asked Sam Snodden to leave the meeting.

Members were asked to consider appointing Sam Snodden as a member of the Audit Committee with immediate effect. Members agreed to the appointment.

Sam Snodden rejoined the meeting.

238.2.3 Board and Committee Effectiveness and Structure Review

The Chairperson reported as part of the benchmarking exercise, Business Consultancy Service (BCS) had made contact with Consumer Focus in GB and the NI Tourist Board as examples of good practice in the public sector. The draft report was expected before the end of February 2012 and would be brought to Council for discussion.

If required, a meeting of Council could be called before the next scheduled meeting of 18 April 2012.

239/2.4 Corporate Plan

The plan had been printed and posted on the website. Members had also received a copy in the post.

239/2.5 Any Other Chair's Business

There was no further Chair's business.

239/3 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

The minutes of the two hundred and thirty-eighth meeting which had been circulated, were agreed and signed.

239/4 MATTERS ARISING

239/4.1 Members had received a written update in relation to the comments made at the November 2010 meeting on the second quarter complaints report.

239/4.2 A statement on the resolution of the irregular payments had been issued as agreed.

239/4.3 The Chairperson and Chief Executive had discussed the issue of consultation timescales with the Chair and Chief Executive of the NI Authority for Utility Regulation (NIAUR). NIAUR had agreed to look at the timings and the Council had agreed to monitor progress before taking any further action.

All other matters arising were main agenda items or would be covered in the Chief Executive's strategic updates.

239/5 FINANCE AND GOVERNANCE

239/5.1 Quarter 3 Management Accounts 2011 – 2012

The third quarter management accounts for the period ended December 2011 showed an under spend of £26k.

The under spend equated to 1% of overall expenditure. Detailed explanations of variances had been provided in the notes.

It was anticipated that the year end position would be breakeven.

Members discussed the reasons why the budget figures differed from forecast figures and received an explanation on how resources were managed during the financial year. They also received an explanation as to why the full year budget showed funding which had not been received.

The Chief Executive reported that the Department had agreed funding received from Atlantic Philanthropies in the current financial year, in relation to the Fuel Poverty Coalition, could be carried over into the next financial year.

Members approved the quarter 3 management accounts.

239/5.2 Risk Register to End of December 2011

The Risk Register to the end of December 2011 had been presented to the Audit Committee at their November meeting.

The Audit Committee had reviewed the register in terms of the management system in place being appropriate and that the risks identified were being properly addressed.

The Director explained the changes to the process and reporting of risk which had been carried out inline with the Department's risk reporting process.

Members discussed the risks in relation to funding, water stakeholder partnership agreement, recruitment and succession planning.

Members approved the risk register to end of December 2011.

239/6 CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S BUSINESS

239/6.1.1 First Draft of Operating Plan 2012 – 2013

The Director explained the process used when business planning. This process adopted a strategic programme and project approach to forward work planning.

The draft operating plan reflected the work to be completed under each of the four corporate objectives:

- Ensuring public policy reflects the needs of today's and tomorrow's consumer;

- Championing and protecting the interests of consumers;
- Informing and empowering consumers; and
- Ensuring CCNI is fit for purpose and delivering value for money.

In this context the focus would be on the delivery of two key pillars of work in the 2012/13 operating period, namely, Consumer Proficiency/Rights and Cost of Living. Members queried how the two pillars had been identified. The Chief Executive explained that the pillars had been identified from the consumer research undertaken for the Corporate Plan, ongoing engagement with consumers, the priority criteria set out by BCS in terms of prioritising our work and a range of external research and data intelligence on what consumers are needing support with.

Members asked that more detail be provided on the specific projects being undertaken. This would clarify a number of questions members had in relation to baselines, targets, outcomes and measures. Further detail and an early meeting of Council would also mitigate the risk of starting a new work programme before it had been approved by Council. It was agreed that the operating plan was being taken forward in the right direction. It was also agreed that a meeting of Council would be convened before the next scheduled meeting of 18 April 2012 to discuss and agree the operating plan.

The Chief Executive advised members that the operating plan should be taken together with the outreach strategy as gaps in one could be addressed in the other.

239/6.1.2 Outreach Strategy 2011 - 2015

Members highlighted the success in Omagh of increasing the number of contacts and asked that consideration be given to using the lessons learned there and replicating the practice in other areas of Northern Ireland.

Members discussed targets, in particular those that were not quantifiable; strength of language being used; definition of “rural”; methods of communicating including enewsletters and; the difference between an outreach strategy and a communications strategy.

The Chief Executive had previously advised members that the outreach strategy and operating plan would respond to the lack of contacts/complaints from specific geographical areas with proposed actions. Members were content that they could come back to this

issue as part of further discussions to ensure that the plans provided the necessary actions to address any under-representation.

Members agreed that the Outreach Strategy should also be brought back to Council before the scheduled 18 April 2012 meeting.

- 239/6.1.3 Members acknowledged the good work being undertaken by the Fuel Poverty Coalition (FPC), which was jointly Chaired by the Consumer Council and National Energy Action NI (NEA). They questioned the high number of policy changes/actions (13) being recommended by the Coalition and the resources that would be required to work across them. The Chief Executive reported that the Council and NEA were currently undertaking a review of the Coalition and for Programme for Government influencing we had reduced the 13 priorities to 7. The review would also include exploration of transferring Atlantic Philanthropies funds for the FPC from the Council to NEA to take forward the work of the Coalition.

239/6.2 Performance against Objectives Quarter Three 2011 - 2012

The majority of projects and activities remained on track for completion by year end.

Two areas of work remain at amber/red status, primarily due to external influence. These were funding for a Financial Capability Strategy and review of the Council's Management Statement and Financial Memorandum.

Members noted the report and a number of areas of work undertaken in Quarter 3 including the publication of the Ferry Research Report, financial capability partnership and car insurance.

239/6.3 Strategic Updates

239/6.3.1 Consumer Focus Post NI (CFPNI) Proposed Transfer to Consumer Council

The Chairperson left the meeting and Mandy Patrick took the Chair.

The Chief Executive provided the new members with background information on the proposed transfer.

The government's response to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) Empowering and Protecting Consumers

consultation was currently being finalised and timescales for implementation of proposed changes would be detailed in their response.

Despite negotiations with BIS and the submission of a business case to take over the advice handling role from Consumer Direct it seemed likely that this NI role would be undertaken by Citizens Advice in GB. It was also likely that the policy role currently undertaken by CFPNI would remain as was until at least 2014.

The Consumer Council would continue to maintain close contact with the key players in the consumer reform landscape while undertaking a watching brief at this stage.

Members noted that if circumstances arose where the Consumer Council felt there was an issue affecting postal consumers it could be addressed under the Council's General Order.

(The Chairperson rejoined the meeting)

239/6.3.2 Water Partnership Agreement

The Chief Executive reported that discussions and meetings had taken place with the Department for Regional Development to re-engage the Consumer Council with a view to the Council rejoining the Water Stakeholder Steering Group. A revised partnership agreement had been drawn up for agreement by all parties.

The Chief Executive advised members that if the Minister provided the necessary assurances that all parties in the partnership were willing to work to the principles in the agreement she would recommend to Council that we re-enter the partnership. Members agreed with this course of action having satisfied themselves that the Council's statutory remit took precedence over the partnership agreement and that the Council would be free to speak openly on any issues affecting water consumers.

239/6.3.3 The Chief Executive provided members with updates on:

Newly formed Ministerial led Fuel Poverty Forum;
Fuel Poverty Coalition; and
Lord Whitty's Report on energy policy

Members noted the strategic updates.

239/7 **POLICY/STRATEGY**

239/7.1 Programme for Government (PfG) Consultation Response

The Director of Policy outlined a small number of changes to the response which had been circulated. These were the inclusion of exploration of regulation of the home heating oil industry; and the development of a detailed and costed action-plan which set out how and when fuel poverty would be eradicated. Both these issues were inline with current policy positions.

Members noted that the biggest gap in the PfG was the lack of a financial capability strategy. Work would continue lobbying Ministers and their special advisors on this major issue.

Members agreed the response with changes as discussed.

The Chairperson thanked the Director for compiling a comprehensive and clear response.

239/7.2 Report on Energy Policy Positions

Following a meeting of small number of members and senior staff a report on the issues discussed and how these issues and related suggestions had or had not influenced the Council's plans in this area of work had been brought to Council for discussion and information.

Colm Bradley advised that this type of meeting was very beneficial to look at specific issues. Depending on outcome of Board and Committee effectiveness and structure review Council may need to consider if more of these types of meetings were required and clarify where the decision making process should fit/work.

Members also discussed the term fuel poverty, which was a defined term from the World Health Organisation, and the exploration of regulation of the home heating oil industry.

The Chief Executive reported that the publication of Lord Whitty's report presented the Council with another opportunity to drive change in the area of energy policy.

The Chairperson thanked the members and staff who had taken part in the meeting.

239/7.3 Complaints Report Quarter Three 2011 - 2012

Members noted that there had been 1052 contacts during this period.

The Head of Consumer Support explained to members how customer satisfaction reports were obtained and the rationale behind them. It was agreed that customer satisfaction figures should be reported cumulatively in the quarterly reports.

Members noted the complaints report.

(Colm Bradley left the meeting)

239/8 **COMMITTEE BUSINESS**

239/8.1 Audit Committee

The Minutes of the fifty seventh meeting which had been circulated, were agreed by the members who had been present at the meeting. Council noted the Minutes.

239/8.2 Business Committee

The Minutes of the tenth meeting which had been circulated, were agreed by the members who had been present at the meeting. Council noted the Minutes.

239/8.3 Consumer Education and Money Affairs Policy Committee

The Minutes of the eighth meeting which had been circulated, were agreed by the members who had been present at the meeting. Council noted the Minutes.

239/8.4 Policy Position Record Year to Date 2011- 2012

The report provided an overview of all policy decisions agreed by Committees and Council year to date 2011 - 2012.

The report was noted.

239/8.5 DETI Quarterly Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 1 December 2011 were noted.

239/9 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Council Meeting Agendas

Members were asked to contact the Chairperson or the Senior Support Officer if there was a particular issue they wished to have included on the agenda.

239/10 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next scheduled meeting would be held on 18 April 2012 at 10.30 am

A special meeting would be arranged before the end of March 2012.

There was no further business and the meeting closed at 1.15 p.m.

Signed _____

Date _____