

**THREE HUNDRED AND FIFTEENTH MEETING OF THE GENERAL CONSUMER COUNCIL FOR NORTHERN
IRELAND HELD ON TUESDAY 21 DECEMBER 2021 AT 10.00AM IN SEATEM HOUSE, BELFAST
AND VIA ZOOM TELECONFERENCE**

315/1.1 ATTENDANCE

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| 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 |
| Ms Amanda Logan | Board Member |
| Mr Gerry McCurdy | Board Member |
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| Ms Noyona Chundur | Chief Executive |
| 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 Richard Williams | Head of Transport |
| Mr Raymond Gormley | Head of Energy |
| Mr Matthew Stevenson | Head of Strategy and Emerging Markets |
| Mr Sean Breen | Senior Financial Services Education Officer |
| Ms Noleen Charnley | Head of Insight and Complaints |
| Ms Lynn Gordon | HR Business Partner |
| Ms Rachel Molloy | HR Advisor |

APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Dr Joan Martin, Mr Alan O’Neill, Mr Graham Smith and Mr Scott Kennerley.

315/1.2 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.

315/1.3 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 26 November 2021, having been circulated, were agreed as a true and correct record.

The Minutes were agreed and signed.

315/1.4 **ACTIONS FROM THE LAST MEETING**

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

315/1.5 **MATTERS ARISING**

The Board was advised that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) had confirmed the Consumer Council remained the preferred option to assume the telecoms consumer advocacy function for Northern Ireland, and the earliest date this would be in place was August 2023. The scope is to include telecoms providers, broadband and pay-per-view TV. There would be no interim funding available from DCMS before the formal arrangement was in place.

There were no further matters arising.

315/1.6 **CHAIR'S BUSINESS**

Members were advised the Director of Corporate Services, currently on a long-term absence of due to ill health, was recovering well and hoped to return to work on a phased return in February 2022.

The Chair commended the Energy team on their work on the Emergency Fuel Payment Scheme with the Department for Communities (DfC) and Bryson, which resulted in securing over £250k in charitable donations from industry to the scheme, due to be announced before Christmas.

The Chair requested for a meeting to be arranged with Jayne Brady, Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, to introduce the Consumer Council and its work, including the recent work on the Emergency Fuel Payment Scheme.

It was agreed the Chief Executive would organise a meeting in Q4 2021-2022.

315/2 **CONSUMER WEEK 2022: PRESENTATION**

The Head of Communication and Outreach gave the presentation on the proposals for Consumer Week 2022, aimed at accessing consumers and increasing our understanding of issues they were most concerned about.

Members highlighted the following:

- Partnership working with academia, councils, community groups for rural and older consumers and ethnic minorities, sports clubs, and organisations that can help target harder to reach audiences.
- Consider the language used and ensure that is accessible and can be understood by all sections of the community, such as the younger and older demographics.

- Ensure analysis of online engagement includes hits to the website alongside dwell times, what pages were accessed and social media engagement.
- The importance of championing consumers and using human stories and challenges to maximise social media engagement.
- Consideration to be given to emerging issues of consumer detriment such as young people with mental health issues and online gambling with university students.
- The impact of food and fuel poverty, the closure of post offices and banks, and the impact on older consumers, particularly in rural areas.

3. **ITEMS FOR APPROVAL**

315/3.1 **Management Accounts: November 2021**

Members were advised that while there was a £213k underspend, year-to-date spend was £180k more than November 2020 and plans were in place to meet the year-end outturn 1% tolerance target.

This was due to salary slippage despite recruitment throughout the year, the lag between recruitment and start dates, ongoing churn of staff on fixed-term contracts and corresponding delays to work programme costs.

Part 2 of January Monitoring is scheduled for mid-December 2021, allowing the final reconciliation of budgets against forecasted expenditure. Directorates have been instructed to ensure they spend allocated forecasts as set out in their budget profiles.

A Member enquired about increased rent when there were fewer people in the office. The Chief Executive advised the rental agreement with the Department of Finance was for three-years as the full impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was still unknown, and the uncertainty around how a formal hybrid working model would be applied.

Members approved the Management Accounts: November 2021.

315/3.2 **2022-2023 Business Case: Infrastructure and Sustainability**

The Director of Infrastructure and Sustainability presented the 2022-2023 Business Case for the Directorate, covering an expanded forward work programme and commensurate staffing complement. This included funding for the Transport team which receives no funding, despite being a statutory function for the Consumer Council. He advised the forward work programme had been socialised with DfE Energy Branch and the Department for Infrastructure who were content with the approach.

Members highlighted the following:

- The growing concern regarding decarbonisation in rural areas.
- The importance of the Consumer Council's role in tariff reviews.

- Research into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on consumer protection measures, and analysis of the changes that may take place.
- Engagement with UK and Irish academia to ascertain what consumer challenges and issues they have come across, in order to understand the limits of public tolerance.

Members approved the 2022-2023 Business Case: Infrastructure and Sustainability.

It was agreed the Director of Infrastructure and Sustainability would incorporate this feedback into the forward work programme.

315/3.3

2022-2023 Business Case: Financial and Postal Services

The Head of Postal Services and Financial Services Policy Officer presented the 2022-2023 Business Case for the Directorate, covering an expanded forward work programme and commensurate staffing complement, and noted a number of joint projects between the Postal Services and EU Exit teams. They advised the forward work programme had been socialised with HM Treasury (HMT) and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) who were content with the approach.

Members highlighted the following:

- EU Exit has had a significant impact on postal services, and post office and bank closures made access even more difficult.
- The need for education programmes and materials to establish baselines and measurable impacts from participation instead of self-reported impacts, including accessing longitudinal studies.
- The need to consider the consumer impacts of online harms and ensure activity is co-ordinated across multiple policy areas and teams.

The Chief Executive advised areas of emerging detriment and work would sit under the Strategy and Emerging Markets Directorate, which would work with relevant teams as required on key initiatives and research.

Members approved the 2022-2023 Business Case: Financial and Postal Services.

It was agreed the Director of Financial and Postal Services would identify key performance indicators to evaluate the impact of educational programmes.

315/3.4

2022-2023 Business Case: Strategy and Emerging Markets

The Director of Strategy and Emerging Markets presented the 2022-2023 Business Case for the Directorate, covering an expanded forward work programme and commensurate staffing complement, and noted a number of joint projects between the Financial and Postal Services teams. She advised the forward work programme had been socialised with DfE GB and EU Trade Branch who were content with the approach.

Members highlighted the following:

- Areas of emerging consumer detriment and opportunities in emerging markets are properly led and co-ordinated across multiple policy areas and teams.
- Increase links with academia so consumer research and monitoring could stand up to independent scrutiny.
- Given the cross-cutting nature of the portfolio, ensure there was no duplication of effort and output with other policy teams.

The Chair highlighted the importance of securing additional resources through core funding to ensure future sustainability.

Members approved the 2022-2023 Business Case: Strategy and Emerging Markets with the caveat all further scrutiny needed to be applied to staffing uplift.

It was agreed the Director of Strategy and Emerging Markets would ensure DfE GB and EU Trade Branch were content with the proposed uplift in staffing and forward work programme projects.

4. ITEMS FOR NOTING

315/4.1 Customer Service Excellence: 2021 Accreditation

Members were advised the 2021 Customer Service Excellence (CSE) assessment resulted in 22 elements graded as Compliance Plus and the remaining 35 graded as fully Compliant.

The reaccreditation process was led by the CSE Working Group, which submitted 114 pieces of evidence. Members offered their congratulations, commending the innovation in the organisation.

A Member asked if rationalisation of annual accreditations had been completed. The Chief Executive advised this had been delayed due to capacity issues in the HR team. However alongside CSE, the organisation would look to retain all three ISO, covering information security, quality management and business continuity, and Investors in People, Best Companies, British Standard 18477 and Diversity Mark.

Members noted the update.

It was agreed the rationalisation of accreditations would be undertaken once there was sufficient capacity within the Corporate Services Directorate.

315/4.2 2022 Employee Engagement Survey

Members were advised the next Best Companies survey, designed to measure employee engagement, would be planned for the end of January or early February with the final report due in Q1 2022-2023. The survey would run for four weeks and be open to all staff who had been with the Consumer Council for more than three months.

The Chief Executive advised the aim was retaining the current 2-star score of 724.7 but was mindful of the significant churn in staff over the last two years, with approximately 45% of the current staffing complement of 63 on fixed-term contracts.

Members noted the update.

315/4.3 City of Derry Airport Accessibility Visit Report

Members were advised of the accessibility visit to City of Derry Airport (CODA) in November, and the visits to Belfast airports are planned for 2022. The CODA is taking forward recommendations following the visit, including the installation of a changing places facility.

Members noted the paper.

It was agreed to share the CODA Report with Mr Pat Ramsey, former MLA and involve him in future visits.

315/4.4 CEO Report: December 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.

5. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There was no further business and the meeting closed at 1.30pm.

6. REVIEW OF THE MEETING


Members were content with the standard of papers and contribution made.

Members requested for papers to be issued through Decision Time and not email.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting will be held on Friday 28 January 2022 at 10am via Zoom teleconference.

Signed



Date

28 January 2022