

**THREE HUNDRED AND TWENTY FOURTH MEETING OF THE GENERAL CONSUMER COUNCIL FOR
NORTHERN IRELAND HELD ON FRIDAY 3 FEBRUARY 2023 AT 10.00AM IN SEATEM HOUSE, ALFRED
STREET, BELFAST, AND VIA ZOOM TELECONFERENCE**

ATTENDANCE

Ms Sheila McClelland	Chair
Mr Mick McAteer	Deputy Chair
Dr Joan Martin	Board Member
Mrs June Butler	Board Member
Mrs Lynne Crowther (from 10.15am)	Board Member
Ms Amanda Logan	Board Member
Dr Sinéad Furey	Board Member
Mr Alan O'Neill	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
Ms Anne-Marie Murphy	Director of Strategy and Emerging Markets
Mr William Warke	Director of Corporate Services
Ms Bernie Tolan	PA to the Chief Executive
Ms Julie Coulter	Administrative Officer
Mr Terry Campbell (for part)	Head of Finance and Governance
Ms Noleen Charnley (for part)	Head of Insights and Complaints

324/1.1

Apologies

Mr Alan O'Neill
Mr William Leathem
Mr Gerry McCurdy

324/1.2

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 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.

324/1.3 Minutes of the last meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 16 December 2022, having been circulated, were agreed as a true and correct record.

The minutes were agreed by Members and signed.

324/1.4 Actions from the last meeting

The Actions from the last meeting were noted by Members.

324/1.5 Matters Arising

The Chief Executive advised the Consumer Council received an invitation from the Department of Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) to host a roundtable in Northern Ireland on 20 January 2023.

- The roundtable was chaired by the Minister of State for Energy and Climate, Graham Stuart MP, responsible for the implementation of the Energy Bills Support Scheme (EBSS) in Northern Ireland. The Minister advised BEIS has taken on this role in the absence of a sitting Executive.
- Representatives from Age NI, Advice NI, Bryson Charitable Group and Bryson Energy, the Commissioner for Older People NI, Fuel Bank Foundation, National Energy Action NI, NICVA, Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and the Utility Regulator were invited to attend. Attendees discussed the roll-out of the £600 payment in Northern Ireland, shared experiences of consumers and service users with the opportunity to ask the Minister questions.
- Participants also discussed the likelihood of energy costs remaining very high and how support may be needed for specific groups.

Mrs Butler asked if there would be further opportunity for other agencies to come together, at which the Chief Executive advised that the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly Committee `C` will be meeting on 6 March 2023. The session will focus on:

- (i) Northern Ireland energy users and consumer energy policy;
- (ii) The challenges households are facing now; and
- (iii) How effectively government interventions/regulation are helping.

The Consumer Council has been asked to consider four organisations which could join the sessions and to prepare written submissions.

Mrs Lynne Crowther joined the meeting at 10.15am

The Chief Executive advised the Consumer Council had received a letter from Jayne Brady, Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service (HOCS), congratulating our work on the EBSS and the work we do across all our areas of responsibility. An invitation to meet with the Consumer Council was extended to Ms Brady which has been accepted and the meeting is scheduled for Monday 27 February in Seatem House. A

programme will be prepared focusing on HOCS three missions:

- Employability and productivity;
- Green Growth and
- Improving Life Opportunities.

It was AGREED that Board Members will be invited to attend.

324/1.6 **Chair's Business**

No Business to Report

2 **PRESENTATIONS**

324/2.1 **Customer Service Excellence Assessment**

The Head of Insight and Investigation joined the meeting at 10.18am.

The Chair welcomed Paul Hindley and the Head of Insight and Investigation to the meeting and invited both to present the report.

The Head of Insight and Investigation advised that to retain the Customer Service Excellence® accreditation, the Consumer Council is subject to a rolling programme of assessment. We were assessed on 13 December 2022 and received the official results.

Mr Hindley advised this was an excellent assessment which showed the high degree of enthusiasm, commitment and empathy of staff. There were two additional compliance plus elements awarded, providing a total of 23 with no areas of partial compliance.

Mr Hindley said it was abundantly clear during the assessment that improvement in customer service was at the heart of everything that the staff undertake. Retaining the accreditation to the CSE Standard is a very commendable achievement in light of the greatly increased workload caused by the pandemic, and recently by the energy crisis.

He suggested further in-depth assessment could possibly be undertaken to broaden the scope within the advocacy score, discounting the opinion of a successful complaint from the actual service received. Mr Hindley advised that the next assessment should be scheduled according to the original timing.

The Chair asked if there is any capacity for the Consumer Council to help other organisations and Mr Hindley stated that a benchmarking strategy is a fantastic way to learn from others. He suggested the Consumer Council could take this forward within GB and promote further CSE take up.

The Director of Infrastructure and Sustainability advised that the Consumer Council already assists other organisations, particularly the regulatory sector. Complaint and

accessibility audits are completed with companies such as Translink, the airports, NIE Networks and NI Water, and we have been approached by an energy supplier to undertake a complaints audit. Learnings from the Insight and Investigation team are directly applied in undertaking the audits.

The Chair thanked Mr Hindley for attending the meeting and his contribution.

The Head of Insight and Investigation left the meeting.

324/2.2 Consumer Council Response to One Stop Shop Implementation Plan Consultation on Policy Options

The Director of Infrastructure and Sustainability presented the Consumer Council response to the One Stop Shop (OSS) consultation and highlighted the following for Members:

- The response focuses on what consumers are likely to need from the OSS.
- Changes to behavioural change will be challenging. A virtual OSS alone will not be sufficient; consumers need an independent trusted voice. To enable behavioural change the OSS needs to be able to accommodate the needs of all consumers including those who voluntarily change and those who are reluctant.
- Future decision-making regarding the governance, operating model and funding of a future OSS should all be determined with the aim of addressing consumers' needs towards meeting Northern Ireland's legislative targets on net zero carbon.
- The most important initial consumer engagement role of the OSS will be to provide consumers with a seamless service with clarity regarding its remit, service offering and eligibility criteria.
- It is important to manage consumers' expectations from the outset as it will not be possible for the OSS remit alone to address all consumer needs relating to the energy transition. Clarity around the scope of the Pilot and what is achievable is required.
- The Consumer Council agrees with the proposal for a new standalone OSS brand. A new brand is likely to provide the greatest clarity for consumers, to best achieve the goal of a single point of consumer contact and will be important to ensure consumer trust in the OSS.
- It is essential that the organisation is adequately financed and resourced, with appropriately qualified staff to ensure delivery.

The Chair said that a transport element is not tied into the OSS messaging, for example decarbonisation of bus fleets, and this shows a vacuum within the OSS message which should be re-enforced to show clarity of direction.

The Chief Executive advised that DfE has ambitions for a transport strategy linked into Green Growth, the Energy Strategy and the Climate Action Plan. However, due to staff turnover within the department this is proving difficult.

The Board agreed this was a good paper without over committing and thanked the Director of Infrastructure and Sustainability and the team.

The Head of Finance and Governance joined the meeting at 11am.

3. ITEMS FOR APPROVAL

Finance and Governance

324/3.1 Management Accounts: November and December 2022

The Head of Finance and Governance provided a summary as at the end of December 2022 and advised that the organisation is on track to meet the 1% budget variance tolerance.

The Chief Executive advised the formal agreement for BEIS Heat Network funding will be signed shortly, and CVs are being considered now for the appointment of a temporary staff member at EO2. A realistic forecast will be submitted to BEIS for this quarter.

Mr McAteer asked if a line chart could be made available to track cumulative spend which compares last year against this year. The Head of Finance and Governance agreed to provide this in future presentations.

Members approved the Management Accounts: November and December 2022 and complimented the Head of Finance and Governance on the quality and detail of the report.

324/3.2 2022-2023 Corporate Scorecard Q3

The Chief Executive advised that in Q3, the following projects had a red (Behind Schedule) or amber (At Risk) RAG status:

- Water Bill Health Checks (WBHCs) – Businesses’ capacity to engage is currently limited and has led to cancellations. Planning is underway to look at ways the Water Team can maximise business partnerships and leverage the profile from Northern Ireland Consumer Week 2023. Currently 57 WBHCs have been completed and 12 are pending.
- The Consumer Detriment Index – Funding was unavailable within opening allocations and the criteria for October Monitoring Round is restricted to inescapable pressures, work programme in statutory areas and capital projects. This, coupled with resource constraints, means the project will now be commenced in Q4 2022-2023 but delivered in 2023-2024.
- Review of the Long Term Water Strategy – This project has moved from ‘At Risk’ to ‘Behind Schedule’ as the Department for Infrastructure (Dfi) has paused

the review of the Long Term Water Strategy and it will not be completed by the end of March 2023.

- Deliver the True Cost Campaign – This project has moved to ‘At Risk’ due to the advertising contract for the campaign being awarded in Q4 and not Q3. This does not impact on the overall project plan as campaign delivery will still be met in Q4.
- Encourage the development of a Government Fuel Poverty Strategy – This project has moved from ‘At Risk’ to ‘On Target’ with DfC appointing the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) to assist in the development of the workstream which the Consumer Council will input into. The Director of Infrastructure and Sustainability advised a very positive first cross departmental meeting has taken place, with the absence of the Department of Health.

The Chair asked if large businesses/Councils could be targeted for WBHCs, and the Director of Infrastructure and Sustainability advised that Councils are already targeted. Whilst the report to Board advises of work with two Councils per year, this does not inform Members to the extent of those contacts. For example, 82 checks have been completed with Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, and 105 checks with Mid and East Antrim Borough Council.

Mr McAteer asked if Social Housing providers are approached and could a list of the largest water users be sourced.

The Director of Infrastructure and Sustainability stated that the majority of engagement is with small business users, however next year it is planned within the Forward Work Programme to engage with the Education Authority and schools.

The three-year Water Work Programme and Business Case is approaching its final year so we can look to engage with DfI in planning for the next cycle to include Social Housing.

The Chief Executive agreed to check if there is a record showing largest water users.

The Chair asked if it was possible to also source a list of the largest energy users.

The Director of Infrastructure and Sustainability said that a scoping exercise was underway to capitalise on the knowledge gained through WBHCs and consider the feasibility of offering energy health checks to businesses.

Members approved the 2022-2023 Corporate Scorecard Q3.

324/3.3

2022-2023 Corporate Risk Register Q3

The Chief Executive advised this paper had been presented to the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) on 24 January 2023. Three risks are carrying a rating of four or more:

CORP5 Finance: The risk rating was kept at moderate due to the one-off cost of living payment for all staff, and the pay uplift which were both included in the

October Monitoring round. If the pay uplift is not approved by the end of March 2023, we would have a budget surplus that we may need to seek approval to carry this forward into the next financial year.

CORP8 People: Employee engagement has been positive, however this has yet to be tested, thus the risk rating remains at four.

CORP9 People: There has been a 76% increase in Consumer Protection contacts compared to Q3 2021-2022 (2,406 vs 4,229), with 412 complaint investigations undertaken. Year to date, the Consumer Protection Team has supported 10,578 consumers, a 72% increase from the previous year.

The team is now operating at a full staffing complement with increased self-service options and NI Direct support. The impact of the increased demand will be kept under review, with additional inter-directorate support in place.

Mrs Butler advised that the ARAC had noted the risks and was content.

Members approved the 2022-2023 Corporate Risk Register Q3.

HR

324/3.4

HR Report: December 2022

The Director of Corporate Services presented the HR Report: December 2022.

- Current resourcing of 54 staff.
- Two resignations received within Communications, however recruitment has been completed with appointments to commence at the end of February and beginning of March.
- Heat Network EO2 post agreed and will be appointed via agency.
- Year to date staff absenteeism rate was 2.2%.
- A total of 115.5 hours of learning and development was completed in November.
- The monthly All Staff Meeting has been scheduled for 8 February and the Employee Engagement Champions will be introduced to the organisation.

The Chief Executive advised Members that due to the volume of calls to the Consumer Protection Team, three standards of service have temporarily been suspended:

- Three hour call back commitment.
- Three-day acknowledgement and five day response.
- Timeframe response from a supplier (which is outside of the Consumer Council's control).

Members approved the HR Report: December 2022

BUSINESS PLANNING**324/3.5 2023-2024 Forward Work Programme**

The Chair asked if the amount of detail in the document is necessary and the Chief Executive advised that our funders expect this volume of detail and that it is also examined by the Auditors. There is opportunity next year to suggest changes/improvements to the template currently being used to make this more consumer friendly.

The Chief Executive advised the main difference from the Business Cases presented to Board is aligning the activities with the outputs delivered. As this progresses it will be presented to the Policy and Research Group.

Dr Sinéad Furey asked if under the Sustainability section alongside the existing inclusion of environment and social/people considerations, reference could also be made to 'economic' considerations (e.g. value for money or signposting to the subsequent Delivering Value section). The Chief Executive agreed to make changes.

The Chair asked (i) What are the price controls for next year? (ii) Are Heat Networks included? (iii) Is the £90k Winter Energy Campaign captured for next year?

- (i) The Director of Infrastructure and Sustainability advised staff are working closely with NIE in relation to its Price Control RP7 which will take effect in 2025, and with NI Water and the Regulator in relation to the midterm review and PC21. These involve a significant amount of work in reviewing the companies' customer service targets. SONI has accepted the Regulator's guidance in the establishment of a new independent board and have published a tender this week seeking assistance in relation to a demerger from EirGrid.
- (ii) The Chief Executive advised that the Heat Networks project had been omitted and agreed to include this.
- (iii) The Director of Infrastructure and Sustainability advised the Winter Energy Campaign is captured and there is discussion with DfE in how it would like to progress it. There is a rollover of £30k from the original project which is planned for the Core Energy Work Programme.

The Chair asked if there were any concerns from the consumer perspective in relation to inflation being built into the projections.

The Director of Strategy and Emerging Markets advised that meetings with the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) Northern Ireland representative are held every two months, and the CMA has been supplying green washing advice to companies. We have planned this year to deliver some consumer advice regarding green washing credentials when buying products.

Mr McAteer asked if the CMA Green Washing review would cover Northern Ireland.

It was agreed that this would be checked.

The Chair advised some supermarkets are removing their 'Hot Deli' counters and Members discussed how this might impact on consumers and the erosion of healthy options. The Director of Strategy and Emerging Markets said that the Consumer Council works closely with ASDA, however some other supermarkets are hard to contact.

It was agreed to seek an introductory meeting with the British Retail Consortium and DfE.

Members approved the 2023-2024 Forward Work Programme with amendments as agreed.

324/3.6 CCNI-DfE Partnership Agreement

The Chair advised the Partnership Agreement had been endorsed at the ARAC, and that DfE is making final considerations internally before it is signed off.

The Chief Executive advised DfE Corporate Governance is considering making all the partnership agreements consistent and may return with some changes through that lens. The version presented, and the feedback from the Board and teams have all been considered, and all updates made by DfE Corporate Governance have been accepted. If Corporate Governance signs off the document, it will then be presented to the Department of Finance (DoF). If Members are content and with the agreement of DfE Corporate Governance, the Chief Executive will share the Agreement with BCS which is completing the arm's length body review of the Consumer Council.

Mrs Butler asked that any changes made to the Agreement are brought to Board, and those changes clearly highlighted. The Chief Executive agreed.

The Chair advised, once the document is agreed, it is essential that Directors familiarise themselves with the content as a key document and operational instruction for the whole organisation, and it is included as part of the staff induction. The Chief Executive agreed.

Members approved the CCNI-DfE Partnership Agreement as it stands.

4. ITEMS FOR NOTING

Research

324/4.1 January ARAC: Verbal Update

Mrs Butler advised all papers presented to the ARAC were discussed and approved. There was discussion regarding the change in audit procedures which is a work in progress with the Audit Office, and Finance and Governance. Stephen Mungavin attended the meeting to advise on risk. Discussion took place around the

organisation risk, particularly directorate risk and external environment risks. A risk workshop has been rescheduled for the beginning of March and will include the Wider Leadership Team.

Members noted the update.

Operational

324/4.2 Northern Ireland Consumer Week 2023

The Chair advised there is limited resources, with a budget of £10k. The Consumer Council will still be showcased at the Balmoral Show Food Hall over four days but on a scaled down version.

Members noted the update.

324/4.3 CEO Report: December 2022

The Chief Executive advised the Director of Strategy and Emerging Markets has joined the Care Poverty Commission Panel, and the Director of Financial and Postal Services has joined the Community Advisory Cash panel.

Members noted the report.

Research

324/4.4 2022-2023 Pulse Surveys: Q2 and Q3

The Chair noted the quality of the information provided and asked if Members were content to note.

Members noted the update.

324/4.5 NI Household Expenditure Tracker: Q1 to Q3

The Chief Executive advised this was the first time the Tracker had been presented to Board, however it has been distributed across various media outlets.

Members noted the update.

324/4.6 Consumer Attitudes to Energy Transition

The Chair commended the document and asked if Members were content to note.

Mr McAteer queried how the information would be used and the Director of Infrastructure and Sustainability advised that the report is a vital tool, highlighting areas of consumer understanding and terminology. It will allow the data to be used to engage with DfE and industry with regard to policy and energy transition, and that understanding consumer expectations is essential for behavioural change. It will also

give us an evidence-based foundation to work from when engaging with stakeholders.

Members noted the update

324/4.7 Household Water Use

The Director of Infrastructure and Sustainability advised the findings of this research will enable the Consumer Council to contribute evidence to discussions and help with development of government policy on sustainability, net zero and water supply security.

The Chair asked if this information could be extended as it provides easy lessons to raise awareness.

The Director of Infrastructure and Sustainability advised on the budget constraints working with DfI, however this research will be fed back to DfI and NI Water as we work through their Price Control and internal review.

Mr McAteer agreed with the Chair and asked if the Consumer Council could publish a newspaper article. Chief Executive agreed to submit a thought piece.

Members noted the update.

324/4.8 EU Exit Parcel Services

Members noted the update.

324/4.9 Translink Complaints Assessment

The Chief Executive advised this document provides the final outputs and recommendations as per the presentation to Board in December by the Transport Policy Officer.

The Director of Infrastructure and Sustainability advised on the good working relationship developed with Translink which is very welcoming in undertaking the assessments. He added that this is a good example of CSE and using our expertise to influence companies' performance on customer service.

A number of energy supply companies are struggling with their customer service offering because of the demand on their services and they have not been able to meet expectations. One of the companies has approached the Consumer Council to undertake a complaints assessment on its behalf. We have submitted a written proposal to the company outlining details and it is anticipated this will happen within the next few weeks.

Members noted the update.

5. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

The Director of Infrastructure and Sustainability advised the 'Call for Evidence' being undertaken with the Utility Regulator on consumer protection will be released within the next few weeks.

Members noted the update.

324/5.1 Closed Session

The Chair advised the meeting would continue in CLOSED SESSION with Members.

The meeting CLOSED at 1.15pm

324/5.2 Review of the Meeting

The Board Members were content with the quality of papers and the presentations made. They requested holding separate briefing meetings for the research reports as they want to be able to give them due regards. Directorates to be chosen individually to present to Board going forward.

DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

The next Board meeting will be held of Friday 3 March 2023 at 10am in Seatem House, with teleconferencing facilities also available.

Signed



Date

3 March 2023