The Consumer Council

Draft Combined Energy, Water and Transport
Draft Forward Work Programme
1 April 2010 to 31 March 2011

Consultation Document
18 February 2010
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1. Consultation Process

Copies of this document are available on request in writing, by telephone, or by e-mail and will be made available (on request) in large print, Braille, Audio Cassette and in minority languages. It is also available on the Consumer Council’s website at www.consumercouncil.org.uk/publications

Responses are invited on all aspects of the Consumer Council's proposed work programme. It would be helpful when replying if you could provide your name, who your organisation represents (if appropriate) and who, if anyone, you have consulted about the paper before submitting your response.

Whilst wanting to ensure that consultees offer information on all aspects of the attached proposed work programme, we particularly welcome comments on the following questions:

- Are the organisational actions reflective of the current consumer need on Energy, Water and Transport?
- Are there any gaps or issues not being addressed in this Forward Work Programme?
- Are there more opportunities for us to deliver some of the outcomes with partner organisations?
- Are there better ways to deliver any of the proposed outcomes?

The Consumer Council welcomes the opportunity to receive responses by meeting representatives of any of the groups identified as relevant to the Section 75 categories if they so prefer.

The consultation exercise will close at 5.00 pm on 13 May 2010, and your views should reach us by then.

Enquiries about consultation arrangements and responses to this document can be made in writing, by telephone, fax or e-mail to:

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2. Who we are and what we do

The Consumer Council's aim is to promote and safeguard the interests of all consumers in Northern Ireland. Our mission is to make the consumer voice heard by business and Government and to make it count with policy and decision makers.

We are a Non-Departmental Public Body within the Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment established under the General Consumer Council (NI) Order 1984. Our functions include consumer affairs, consumer education, consumer support and complaints handling as well as a multi-utility statutory role to represent consumers in electricity, natural gas, transport and water.

The Consumer Council is a “super-complainant” body under the Enterprise Act 2002. This gives us specific powers to refer areas of the market place which we believe are not working in the best interests of consumers. We are the first organisation in Northern Ireland to receive this status and one of only eight in the United Kingdom.

3. Introduction

The Consumer Council has a statutory duty to develop and consult on a forward work programme for Water and Energy under the Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006 and the Energy Order 2003 respectively.

The Consumer Council’s legal requirements include:

- To achieve redress for consumers by investigating water and energy complaints to secure the best possible outcome.
- To produce a combined Energy and Water Forward Work Programme in line with the Energy Order 2003 and the Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006.
- To ensure compliance with equality legislation and have regard to Government anti-poverty initiatives so that vulnerable consumers are placed at the centre of the Consumer Council’s work.
- Consider and make recommendations on any transport matter affecting passenger travelling to, from or within Northern Ireland.

Whilst we currently do not have a statutory remit to do so, the Consumer Council is also consulting on our Transport work programme for the first time. Public Transport is undergoing a significant structural change as part of the Reform of Public Transport. This process will have a major impact on the functions and role of key stakeholders including the Department of Regional Development, transport providers such as Translink and the Consumer Council. Within this period of change we feel it is important to provide openness and transparency to stakeholders on the priorities which the Consumer Council has identified to focus upon in the forthcoming year.
We are pleased to present the Consumer Council’s first integrated draft forward work programme, which sets out our plans for our three work areas of Energy, Water and Transport for 1 April 2010 to 31 March 2011. This combined forward work programme is set in the context of our final year of our three year Corporate Strategy 2008-2011 and is subject to final funding being made available to deliver the programme.

4. Our Approach

In order to help us ensure that our work programme is meaningful, forward looking and relevant the Consumer Council began consulting on its work activities for 2010/11 by speaking to our key stakeholders to explore where our efforts would be best placed in the coming year. In this regard, we were able to take into consideration projects being planned or undertaken by some of our statutory partners and to assess the potential input or assistance we could provide. We believe that this approach of early consultation has allowed us to develop the forward work programme incorporating the valuable and rich comments and suggestions provided in those meetings.

This is the final year of our Corporate Plan 2008 to 2011. The progress made during this final year will help to provide a springboard in the development of the next Corporate Plan.

This combined Energy, Water and Transport forward work programme reflects the Consumer Council’s mission statement “Making the Consumer Voice Heard and Making it Count”; values “Courage, Conviction and Creativity”; and the Corporate Themes of:

1. Delivering consumer knowledge, skills and information for all
2. Championing and protecting the interests of all consumers
3. Driving change to benefit consumers
4. Enabling consumers to make responsible choices
5. Fit for purpose and delivering value for money

The principles which guide our work are:

- Working in partnership
- Embracing diversity
- Reducing inequalities
- Promoting equality, good relations and inclusiveness
- Promoting sustainability

5. The Context of the 2010/11 Forward Work Programme

This forward work programme is set within the context of a fast-changing world. Eighteen months ago consumers were faced with steeply rising cost of living as food and fuel prices rocketed. Today few households have been untouched by
the worldwide recession and many are not experiencing the “green shoots of recovery”.

While prices have somewhat reduced, and the cost of living is not as expensive as it was 12 months ago, consumers are faced with different challenges that the recession has brought. Consumer confidence and trust has been rocked over the last year. It has been an uncertain time for consumers.

Credit is much harder to access and unemployment levels are at all time highs. These factors are causing debt and affordability concerns for a vast number of consumers, leaving many struggling to make ends meet. This is compounded by evidence that some prices such as petrol and diesel and home heating oil are beginning to creep up again.

The current position of the nation’s economy along with looming elections, first at Westminster and then at our own Assembly set out some of the most pressing challenges for consumers and the Consumer Council in 2010 to 2011.

But even within these difficult times we are seeing the emergence of a more resilient consumer; a consumer who is no longer willing to accept things at face value. Consumers are demanding more information, openness and transparency from those who provide goods and services.

So, a more savvy and challenging consumer expects more from their public services, from the goods and services they purchase and ultimately for the money in their pocket. This is a strong positive challenge that Government, service providers and business must grasp.

Water

The NI Executive’s decision to defer domestic direct water charging in 2009/10 gave much needed relief to householders when being hit so hard from other directions. However, the Consumer Council recognises the economic pressure on the NI Assembly’s budgets and wishes to encourage the NI Assembly and Executive to hold an open debate regarding the options of funding NI Water, whether that is continued government subsidy or direct domestic charging. It is vital that whatever the decision the NI Executive reaches on domestic water charges that consumers are involved, informed and supported.

The Price Control of 2010 (PC10) for water provides the framework for NI Water to deliver on the Minister for Regional Development’s Social and Environmental guidance. The final determination released by the Utility Regulator on PC10 determines the next three years work programme for NI Water and has an impact on every household and business in Northern Ireland. This is the first price control in Northern Ireland and many lessons have been learnt along the way. It will be important in moving forward to harness and bank these lessons for positive outcomes.

The Consumer Council has an essential role to monitor developments during the PC10 period, not least in ensuring NI Water deliver on consumers’ priorities
as set out in our research “Tapping into Consumer Views”. In addition we will begin to look to the future to consider the factors to be included to help develop the next Price Control which will set out the financial requirements until 2018. It will be called PC13.

Energy

Energy is at the heart of modern life. It powers our industry, and lights and heats our homes and preserves our food, and it even provides entertainment. The reality is that due to carbon constraints and ageing energy infrastructure, Northern Ireland consumers face an unparalleled transformation of their energy generation infrastructure at a time when prices are high and rising. High energy prices also mean the most vulnerable in society – the elderly and the poor – won't be able to afford to heat or light their homes, and less affordable fuel prices means some industries in particular would be forced to move abroad, causing more unemployment in Northern Ireland.

It is vital that consumers know that they are getting a fair deal in purchasing their energy needs, and that they are confident and empowered to make the best decisions possible. Consumers need to be able to assert more individual control over their own energy consumption. The Consumer Council will continue to work to empower the consumers so that they are educated and confident to take decisions that reflect their particular circumstances, and recognise the impacts their lifestyle has on the environment.

We are starting to see the early signs that competition may finally enter the domestic energy market in Northern Ireland. If designed correctly, competition can be a key mechanism in delivering lower prices and choice to consumers. However, to be viable, competition must improve the customer experience for all consumers, including the vulnerable. No customer should be worse off as a result of competition and the price of energy must not increase due to measures taken to introduce competition. If the energy market opens up and the potential for more competition increases, the Regulator and the Government need to ensure that the interests of consumers are protected and considered at every stage.

As a responsible society, we cannot ignore the need for low-carbon electricity, because current trends show that global carbon emissions are set to reach double pre-industrial levels before 2050, with a potentially severe impact on our climate. We need to begin the shift to a low-carbon energy system.

Transport

It is well recognised that an effective and efficient public transport system is essential to support economic growth, social inclusion and environmental sustainability.

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1 Tapping into Consumer Views on Water: A Research Report by the Consumer Council commissioned by NI Water, March 2009
The current Reform of Public Transport provides a key opportunity over the next year to shape how public transport is governed, designed and delivered across Northern Ireland. The Consumer Council, as a key stakeholder within the reform process, will seek to ensure a public transport system emerges with a strong focus on passengers, value for money and better integration that will promote and encourage the modal shift required to help meet our sustainability, social inclusion and economic priorities.

Poor transport and public transport can reinforce social exclusion people experience in terms of accessing employment and education opportunities. There is a clear need to promote accessibility to jobs, employment and education facilities through improvements to our transport infrastructure and public transport services.

The role of our air and sea ports is essential to developing the Northern Ireland economy - our air and sea ports have a significant role in accessing markets, encouraging inward investment and boosting tourism. In particular the aviation market has grown significantly over the last number of years in terms of passenger numbers and route availability. This presents a positive challenge to the Consumer Council to ensure the rights and responsibilities of airline passengers are promoted and protected.

The local aviation market continues to develop and there are key issues which affect local passengers such as aviation duty, airport expansion, environmental impact and access to airports. The Consumer Council is keen to work with the Assembly to encourage the development of a strategic framework in which these issues are fully considered in order to provide a long term view for how aviation develops within Northern Ireland.

6. **Presentation of the Energy, Water and Transport Forward Work Programme 1 April 2010 to 31 March 2011**


The Consumer Council recognises it cannot deliver its objectives in isolation. All of our aims and activities must be fully shared with our stakeholders and many of them delivered in partnership with them.

7. **Expenditure on Energy, Water and Transport**

The Consumer Council’s indicative cost requirement for Water is £646,000 for 2010/11.

Given the pending outcome of the Northern Ireland Executive’s decisions regarding the way forward for water charging it will be necessary to keep our work programme under review and therefore our cost estimate may be subject to change.
The Consumer Council’s indicative cost requirement for Energy is £492,000 for 2010/11.

The Consumer Council’s indicative cost requirement for Transport is £401,000 for 2010/11.

8. Key Priorities

This final year of the Corporate Plan not only sees us delivering on the outcomes described in the Plan for 2008/11 but also sees us looking to how we should be informing the future development of our work.

The past number of years has been a period of significant growth for the Consumer Council. In April 2007 we undertook the statutory responsibility for Water, we have developed dedicated teams for transport and money affairs and with the fluctuation in energy prices and the impending Strategic Energy Framework we have needed to dedicate more staff resource to our Energy Team.

To harness this growth and to ensure cohesion and consistency across the Consumer Council we are having a particular focus on a number of cross-section projects. This will help to ensure that a public transport consumer enjoys the same level of consumer representation and advocacy as a consumer of energy or water or banking.

The key priorities we will be working on this year include:

- **Consumer Research**

  Making the consumer voice heard and making it count is the Consumer Council’s mission statement. It is therefore essential that we listen to and reflect consumers’ views in our wide remit of work and representation.

  The Consumer Council will conduct a qualitative and quantitative piece of research to get an insight into consumer behaviours and choices.

  This research will help to guide the Corporate Plan for 2011/14 providing evidence of the areas of work consumers need and want us to focus on. It will provide an insight into how behaviours have shifted or changed as a result of the worst recession since the Second World War, and importantly, it will provide a robust framework for future policy and campaigns.

- **Sustainability**

  The Consumer Council will undertake research on the role that consumers can play in achieving a sustainable future for Northern Ireland. The research will help to identify the role of the Consumer Council within the sustainability debate.
• Price of being Poor – Research and Conference

We will publish a report of research and recommendations on the price of being poor in Northern Ireland.

In 2001 and 2002, the Consumer Council published a series of five papers which aimed to raise awareness and promote discussion of the particular problems experienced by low income consumers. This project will assess progress since 2001 and identify gaps remaining as well as new areas which are causing detriment to low income consumers.

The Consumer Council will deliver a conference which provides a platform to launch our price of being poor report and to seek commitment from stakeholders for our recommendations.

• Improved billing processes

The Consumer Council has a number of billing principles which we ensure that all service providers comply with to ensure that consumers have a range of ways to pay their bills without additional charge.

The Consumer Council recognises that all consumers have a responsibility to pay their household bills for the services they have received. It is important that service providers provide clear information about what the bill is for and how it has been calculated.

This project will review the current billing processes, to include debt recovery to identify consistent processes applied across all service providers. It will also identify best practice within billing and debt management processes and will therefore identify opportunities for further improvement.
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<th>Key Operational Action</th>
<th>By</th>
<th>Resp.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1a</td>
<td>Increase levels of consumer proficiency and improve consumer skills across the community and in a complex and changing marketplace.</td>
<td>To develop Energywise leaflets to advise consumers on domestic energy competition, and energy performance certificates so that they are empowered to get the best deal for their household.</td>
<td>October 2010</td>
<td>Energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To use findings of Air Passenger Research (Mar 2010) to improve passengers’ understanding of their rights and responsibilities when travelling by air and develop a set of actions for airports and airlines to improve the passenger experience and ensure effective redress when complaints arise.</td>
<td>Sept 2010</td>
<td>Transport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To monitor air, ferry fares, additional charges and fuel prices on a monthly basis. Identify long and short term trends in markets and provide consumer advice on how to obtain the best deal.</td>
<td>Throughout year until March 2011</td>
<td>Transport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1b</td>
<td>Position the Consumer Council as a leader in the development of best practice on consumer issues with key stakeholders.</td>
<td>To pilot a Consumer Council conference which provides a platform for priority issues for consumers and seek commitment from stakeholders for our recommendations.</td>
<td>Sept 2010</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To publish a review on the recommendations made in the “Tapping into Consumer Views on Water” research report and to update the Consumer Views Research.</td>
<td>Dec 2010</td>
<td>Water</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To establish relationships with key RPA stakeholders, including local councils, to ensure the role of Consumer Council is reflected within RPA developments.</td>
<td>Throughout year until March 2011</td>
<td>All</td>
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Be a socially responsible organisation through our work with the local community

To develop links with the local schools and share our skills to make a positive contribution and impact.

Throughout year until March 2011

All

To facilitate the development of a 'People First' forum to meet at least three times a year comprising key stakeholders to examine social exclusion issues around access to public transport services.

Throughout year until March 2011

Transport

CORPORATE THEME: CHAMPIONING AND PROTECTING THE INTERESTS OF ALL CONSUMERS

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<th>Key Operational Action</th>
<th>By</th>
<th>Resp.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2a</td>
<td>Enhance Consumer Council reputation for being in-touch with consumers and as a credible and authoritative consumer representative body.</td>
<td>To carry out a piece of research among a wide sample of consumers to provide a sound evidence base of consumer views on key issues.</td>
<td>Sept 2010</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To hold a series of energy briefings/tutorials for party officials on the Consumer Council’s energy policy in and around the Party Conferences.</td>
<td>March 2011</td>
<td>Energy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To conduct 6 consumer panels across Northern Ireland on a range of key consumer issues.</td>
<td>Throughout year until March 2011</td>
<td>All</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To position the Consumer Council in key public affairs debates through contribution of evidence at relevant NI Assembly Committees and by producing bi-monthly briefings setting out consumer views on key issues such as social tariffs, fuel poverty etc.</td>
<td>Throughout year until March 2011</td>
<td>All</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>To deliver a consumer road show (based on the 2009/10 pilot) in at least three areas of Northern Ireland, according to the highest levels of need, in order to raise awareness – especially beyond greater Belfast – of the Consumer Council’s various roles and remits.</td>
<td>Throughout year until March 2011</td>
<td>All</td>
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<td>No.</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Details</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>To comply with and deliver on new statutory duties around section 75 responsibilities and completion of the annual return for the Equality Commission.</td>
<td>Throughout the year until March 2011</td>
<td>All</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2a</td>
<td>To take forward recommendations from the Attitudes to Public Transport research to examine the barriers preventing young people using public transport more and identify solutions.</td>
<td>Dec 2010</td>
<td>Transport</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2b</td>
<td>Work with Regulators and Government to develop consumer focused regulation and legislation that respects all consumers.</td>
<td>To work with the Utility Regulator to develop Guaranteed Standards of Service which reflect consumer views research and consumer needs.</td>
<td>March 2011</td>
<td>Energy / Water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To ensure the Consumer Council is &quot;informed, involved and consulted&quot; on all relevant processes and functions of the Public Transport Agency as identified within the DRD Programme Board Paper 2 (Nov 2009).</td>
<td>January 2011</td>
<td>Transport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To lobby Government to make decisions regarding the future funding of NI Water considering the principles of fairness, affordability and sustainability.</td>
<td>Throughout the year until March 2011</td>
<td>Water</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To further develop the Consumer Council role as the National Enforcement Body for Access to Air Travel Regulation (EC 1107) by promoting the Regulation, handling complaints and representing passengers at a UK and EU level.</td>
<td>Throughout the year until March 2011</td>
<td>Transport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2c</td>
<td>Ensure consumers receive a reasonable and fair outcome when redress is required, where supplier redress systems are accessible, easily understood, fair and effective for consumers.</td>
<td>To achieve a beneficial impact (tangible outcome or change following the Consumer Council’s investigation) for at least 75% of complaints received from consumers.</td>
<td>March 2011</td>
<td>Cons Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To implement an annual complaint assessment in NI Water to assist in</td>
<td>Dec 2010</td>
<td>Water</td>
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the improvement of complaint resolution.

### CORPORATE THEME: DRIVING CHANGE TO BENEFIT CONSUMERS

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3a</td>
<td>Work with utility, transport and other service providers to ensure more consumer focused and consistent policies.</td>
<td>To work with service providers to improve billing processes and ensure all customers have easy access to discuss their accounts.</td>
<td>March 2011</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To undertake research with consumers that have switched to natural gas to understand their experiences and to ensure the process is consumer focused, and delivering the best value in terms of service, cost and sustainability.</td>
<td>January 2011</td>
<td>Energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To work with NIW to develop a suite of customer focused key performance indicators for NI Water to demonstrate consumer experience.</td>
<td>March 2011</td>
<td>Water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3b</td>
<td>Influence all markets to work better for consumers.</td>
<td>To lobby at an EU and UK level and work with individual airlines to improve the transparency of airline pricing practices.</td>
<td>January 2011</td>
<td>Transport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To respond to relevant consultations and act as a representative of consumer interest in shaping policy and legislative change.</td>
<td>Throughout year until March 2011</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To develop a high-level energy advisory group to look at the issues of fuel poverty, energy security and sustainable energy.</td>
<td>Throughout year until March 2011</td>
<td>Energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3c</td>
<td>Implement initiatives and measures to protect consumers who are experiencing financial hardship.</td>
<td>To publish a report of research and recommendations on the Price of Being Poor.</td>
<td>Sept 2010</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To undertake research to inform Regulators and Government on fuel poverty and how social/affordability tariffs have worked elsewhere, to support the early introduction of energy social tariffs in Northern Ireland. October 2010 Energy

## CORPORATE THEME: ENABLING CONSUMERS TO MAKE RESPONSIBLE CHOICES

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<tr>
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<th>By</th>
<th>Resp</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4a</td>
<td>Develop and roll out a strategy to increase consumer understanding of responsible consumerism.</td>
<td>To define the role of consumers can play in achieving a sustainable future in NI and identify future actions related to CC role.</td>
<td>Nov 2010</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To work with statutory partners to develop a strategy to be rolled out at a local level within communities regarding the cause and effect of water pollution.</td>
<td>March 2011</td>
<td>Water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To ensure passengers understand the environmental impact of their travel choices. Support air passengers to become aware of how Air Passenger Duty (APD) is calculated. Lobby HM Treasury to ensure APD is ring-fenced for climate change activities.</td>
<td>Dec 2010</td>
<td>Transport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4b</td>
<td>Improve consumers ability to be price sensitive and make better choices about goods and services.</td>
<td>To develop an Energywise leaflet on energy related improvements/products so that they can make better choices about improvements they make to their home.</td>
<td>October 2010</td>
<td>Energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To organise and deliver a Christmas campaign to include advice around making responsible choices and purchases in order to help consumers protect their savings, deposits and purchases.</td>
<td>Dec 2010</td>
<td>All</td>
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NB – Energy, Water and Transport refer to policy teams within the Consumer Council; Consumer Support is the complaints handling function of the Consumer Council; and All refers to projects which require input from all teams within the organisation.
10. Conclusion

The Consumer Council believes it has developed a challenging and exciting work programme for 2010/11. It is one that has the potential to deliver great benefits for consumers and one that will provide us with a solid bedrock as we move into our next Corporate Plan for 2011/14.

We are very keen to hear all of our stakeholders' views on the activities we are proposing for the year ahead. We would greatly value your opinions and would ask you when submitting your responses to the draft Forward Work Programme to give some consideration to the following questions:

- Are the organisational actions reflective of the current consumer need on Energy, Water and Transport?
- Are there any gaps or issues not being addressed in this Forward Work Programme?
- Are there more opportunities for us to deliver some of the outcomes with partner organisations?
- Are there better ways to deliver any of the proposed outcomes?

The consultation will close at 5.00 pm on 13 May 2010, and your views should reach us by then. After we have considered all of the responses received we will publish our Forward Work Programme on our website www.consumercouncil.org.uk as well as writing individually to all those who have responded.

We look forward to hearing from you.
Annex 1  Statutory Duties in Energy, Water and Transport

The Energy (NI) Order 2003 gave the Consumer Council extended powers and an expanded remit with responsibility for representing the interests of electricity consumers in Northern Ireland. The Consumer Council has the statutory duty to represent water and sewerage consumers under The Water and Sewerage Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006.

The Consumer Council’s statutory functions and duties are laid down in each of these Orders and include:

- The function of
  - making proposals or providing advice and information about consumer matters
  - representing the views of consumers on such matters
  - obtaining and keeping under review information about consumer issues and the views of consumers on those matters
- a duty to investigate and seek to resolve consumer complaints against companies about regulated matters
- the function of giving information to Ministers, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation (NIAUR), licence holders and any other body with a consumer interest, such as local authorities
- the ability to publish information about:
  - complaints made against energy suppliers, transporters, distributors and water and sewerage companies both directly to the Consumer Council and also to the relevant licensee
- a specific duty to “have regard” to the interests of
  - individuals who are disabled or chronically sick
  - individuals of pensionable age
  - individuals with low incomes
  - individuals residing in rural areas
- a wide power to investigate any matter which appears to be a matter relating to the interests of consumers in relation to gas conveyed through pipes or electricity conveyed through distribution systems or water and sewerage services
- powers to publish information where we think it would be in the consumer interest
- the requirement in each financial year to publish a forward work programme containing a general description of the projects that we plan to undertake the following year.

The Consumer Council is in the process of agreeing a new combined Memorandum of Understanding with NIAUR, which will lead to an open, constructive and effective relationship between the two bodies, while respecting their different emphases.

The Energy Order and Water Order require the Consumer Council to publish a forward work programme for each financial year, but before doing so it must consult on a draft of the Programme to allow it to consider any representations and comments made.
The General Consumer Council (Northern Ireland) Order 1984 sets out the functions of the Council in relation to transport:

5.—(1) The Council shall consider and, where it appears to it to be desirable, make recommendations with respect to any matter affecting road or railway passenger transport services and facilities in Northern Ireland and services and facilities provided for passengers travelling to and from Northern Ireland.

(2) The Transport Users’ Committee established under section 1 of the M1 Transport Act (Northern Ireland) 1967 is hereby abolished and the Council shall exercise the functions heretofore exercisable by the Transport Users' Committee under sections 6(2) and (3), 59(1) and (2) and 60(2) of that Act.