



The Consumer Council

# Making Choices Today - What About Tomorrow? Taking Positive Actions for the Future





## Foreword

Sustainable development can be a difficult concept to understand. We struggle with it as a Council and as consumers. What we do know is that, in Northern Ireland we are consuming at a rate that we cannot maintain. Consumers need to understand how the choices we make have an impact on the planet and how to make responsible choices that meet our needs today without limiting the choices of future generations.

Responsible consumer choices are central to the Consumer Council's new Corporate Plan. One of the Plan's themes "Enabling Consumers to Make Responsible Choices" aims to:

- Create a better understanding of responsible consumerism;
- Use our influence to change expectations and raise standards;
- Raise awareness of sustainability in relation to consumer consumption and choices;
- Promote a co-ordinated approach; and
- Position the Consumer Council as a thought leader and advocate of responsible consumerism.

Not only does the Consumer Council have a role to play in encouraging the debate on responsible consumerism in Northern Ireland, but it must also lead by example. As an organisation, we aim to inform and influence the responsible choices debate. We must also support consumers in their rights and responsibilities in the developing sustainability strategy. Engaging with consumers and supporting them in their efforts to make responsible choices will also assist in promoting ownership of the sustainability agenda so that action is taken.

In late 2005, we held a thought provoking and challenging seminar to inform and promote debate with our partners and the public – young and old. It will help inform and shape actions around the Government's Sustainable Development Strategy. The event brought together a panel of internationally respected speakers to encourage debate on a range of subjects - encouraging behavioural change, energy, food, money, planning, transport, waste and water. It aimed to identify what it means to be a responsible consumer and what we can all do to make a difference. The delegates also heard what responsible consumerism means to young people who will inherit the world that we leave behind.

Sustainable development is a difficult concept to understand. The event was designed to make the issue of responsible consumerism real for everybody and appreciate that many small changes can have a big impact. It was an opportunity for us to listen and learn from experts and delegates to see what this issue really means for consumers and how we all can make more responsible choices now and in the future.

The Consumer Council is committed to working in partnership to bridge the gap between consumer aspirations for a better quality of life and the need to reduce our impact on the earth's resources. We will also promote the need for innovative new products and services with lower environmental impacts.



**Steve Costello, MBE, Chairman**

## Introduction

Sustainable development, consumption and production are complex issues and people can struggle to understand what they mean for them. Rightly, people want to know what their choices mean for the future and if they will always be able to enjoy the same choice of products. Are they using up non-renewable resources and therefore restricting long-term choices? There is also the question of reconciling choices, behaviours and attitudes: do consumers always mean what they say and do what they intend? We need to highlight the implications for consumers of our choices, behaviours and attitudes.

Consumers are more sophisticated than they are given credit for and can understand complex issues if they are presented clearly. Therefore, the Consumer Council decided to break the issue down so that it was relevant to consumers in their daily lives.



*Presenters, facilitators and panellists; Back row: Lester Manley, Globalclub; Michael Donnelly, Second Nature; Steve Costello; Paul Steedman, Sustainable Consumption Roundtable; Front row: Pooran Desai, BioRegional Development Group; Eleanor Gill; Paul Jowitt, SISTech.*

On 28 September 2005, the Consumer Council held an event on responsible consumer behaviour. The event highlighted sustainability as a consumer issue relevant to the everyday decisions people make on energy, transport, food, water, waste, money, housing and planning. The event also investigated how to encourage people to change their behaviour in order to consume responsibly.

The event, *Responsible Choices: Making Choices Today – What About Tomorrow?* attracted an audience of nearly 250 people from the public, private and community/voluntary

sectors. Everyone engaged around the subject of what we, as consumers, can do to contribute to sustainable consumption and production through responsible consumer behaviour.

## Next steps

### The Consumer Council made three commitments:

- To provide a record of the speakers' contribution;
- To state how we would take the identified issues forward; and
- To continue to lead on the issue of responsible consumption and contribute to the emerging Sustainable Development Strategy and action plan.

The full conference report is available on request or you can download it from our website at [www.consumercouncil.org.uk](http://www.consumercouncil.org.uk) or on request. It provides a full record of the conference and the issues identified by delegates to be taken forward.

# 1. Responsible consumer behaviour - What does it mean?

Our growing appetite for spending and the unsustainable nature of consumer behaviour are now headline political issues. Responsible consumer behaviour is one important element of the sustainable consumption debate – a key issue facing our society.

The Department of the Environment (DoE) is publishing a Sustainable Development Strategy and developing an Action Plan. The Consumer Council is committed to highlighting consumers' roles in this agenda. Consumers should be empowered to have genuine choice, and be able to make responsible consumer choices and practise responsible consumer behaviour. We look forward to continuing to inform the debate and helping to deliver the Northern Ireland strategy in partnership with others.

## 2. Why should we be interested?

The conference was based on the areas that impact on consumers' daily lives. The need for action is clear. We cannot sustain our levels of consumption in Northern Ireland. Put explicitly, we would need three planets to support our current lifestyles and choices. We have made some progress but more still needs to be done.

### Did you know?

#### Energy

- Northern Ireland's target is to source 12 per cent of electricity from renewables by 2012<sup>1</sup>. Currently, about three per cent of electricity consumed in Northern Ireland is generated from renewable energy sources in Northern Ireland<sup>2</sup>.
- The energy efficiency of our homes has been increasing.
- Energy consumption has also been increasing.
- People can save £250 per year and two tonnes of carbon dioxide per household by being energy efficient<sup>3</sup>.



<sup>1</sup> Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (2004) Energy: A Strategic Framework for Northern Ireland

<sup>2</sup> Department of the Environment (2006) First Steps Towards Sustainability: A Sustainable Development Strategy for Northern Ireland, p108.

<sup>3</sup> Energy Saving Trust (2006) What Can I Do Today? <http://www.est.org.uk/myhome/whatcan/>

## Transport

- People in the UK make more use of cars than any other European country despite having below average car ownership<sup>4</sup>. Statistics show that people are walking and cycling less and using their cars more<sup>5</sup>.
- In the ten years from 1988 to 1998 road traffic levels rose by 22 per cent<sup>6</sup>. While car journeys have gone up, public transport journeys in Northern Ireland during this period have decreased.
- The real cost of motoring is going down. Over the past 20 years the overall cost of motoring has remained at or below the 1980 level. The cost of using public transport is increasing with public transport fares up by 30 to 40 per cent<sup>7</sup>.

## Food

- Food can travel thousands of miles from farm to fork with the associated costs to the environment<sup>8</sup>.
- When shopping for food, consumers prioritise quality and price over local food<sup>9</sup>.
- Excessive food packaging can waste precious resources and also mislead consumers. Recent omnibus research by Which? found that 87 per cent (of a sample of 1,594) of respondents believed that there is too much packaging on the goods we buy<sup>10</sup>.
- UK families waste around £420 worth of food per person every year<sup>11</sup>.
- One in three boys and one in four girls are overweight. Four-fifths (79 per cent) of a sample of 4,000 believed that food high in fat, salt and sugar should not be promoted during children's television viewing hours<sup>12</sup>.

## Water

- The global demand for water is rising at more than double the rate of population growth<sup>13</sup>.
- In Northern Ireland there will be a shortfall of 20 per cent in drinking water by 2030 if we continue to use water at current levels<sup>14</sup>.
- One-third (34 per cent) of Northern Ireland's treated water supply is lost through leaking infrastructure<sup>15</sup>.
- It is two to four times cheaper to save water rather than build a completely new water source<sup>16</sup>.



<sup>4-7</sup> Woodside, A., and Seymour, J. (2004) The Congestion Conundrum: Sustainable Solutions? (Sustainable infrastructure), presentation to the New Zealand Society for Sustainability Engineering and Science.

<sup>8</sup> Sustain (2001) Eating Oil – Food Supply in a Changing Climate [http://www.sustainweb.org/chain\\_fm\\_eat.asp](http://www.sustainweb.org/chain_fm_eat.asp).

<sup>9</sup> Consumer Council (1999) What's in Store? Consumer Views on Grocery Shopping.

<sup>10</sup> Which? (June 2005)

<sup>11</sup> Fitzpatrick, M. (2005) What a Waste – Japan Faces up to Food Waste Mountain [http://www.just-food.com/features\\_detail.asp?art=980](http://www.just-food.com/features_detail.asp?art=980)

<sup>12</sup> Which? (June 2005)

<sup>13</sup> BBC News Online (2004) Water Scarcity: A Looming Crisis? <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/3747724.stm> accessed 19.10.04

<sup>14</sup> Department for Regional Development (2002) Water Resource Strategy 2002-2030.

<sup>15</sup> Consumer Council (2004) Water: A Clear Way Forward.

<sup>16</sup> National Consumer Council (2002) Towards A Sustainable Water Charging Policy.

## Waste

- The UK produces 400 million tonnes of rubbish a year and this is increasing by approximately three or four per cent, year on year<sup>17</sup>.
- One million plastic bags are handed out every minute across the world<sup>18</sup>.
- Northern Ireland's *Wake Up To Waste* campaign, launched in 2002, became a well-recognised initiative and has been very effective in raising awareness of the waste issue and individual responsibility. Household recycling rates in Northern Ireland have increased from 8.9 per cent in 2001/2002 to 18.9 per cent in 2004/05.

## Money

- Consumer lending in the UK rises by £1million every four minutes. Total lending to individuals has exceeded £1 trillion - an average of £19,000 for every man, woman and child in the UK<sup>19</sup>.
- Northern Ireland consumers owe around £3 billion, compared with the total Northern Ireland economic output of £22 billion. Our research has shown that 41 per cent of consumers here admit to struggling from time to time with bill and debt repayments. One-quarter (27 per cent) said they had as much credit as they could afford or more than they could afford<sup>20</sup>.
- 25 million cases worth £5 billion are referred to debt collection agencies each year in the UK<sup>21</sup>.



## Housing and planning

- Planning policy affects where we live, shop, work and commute.
- Under the Regional Development Strategy there is an anticipated need for 200,000 additional dwellings up to 2015<sup>22</sup>.
- One-third of carbon dioxide output is attributable to housing and this contributes to climate change<sup>23</sup>.
- The UK Government has produced a new code for sustainable homes requiring a commitment to regulate to achieve water efficiency savings.

## Encouraging behavioural change

- The challenge is to try to encourage consumers of all ages to make small but meaningful changes to their lifestyles, which can pay dividends without affecting quality of life.
- Consumers need to feel confident that they are acting in step with others so that we are not saying one thing and doing another.

<sup>17</sup> BBC News Online (2003) Rubbish 'Massive Problem' in UK [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/3003673.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/3003673.stm) accessed 16.05.03

<sup>18</sup> Reader's Digest (September 2005) Bag Habits.

<sup>19</sup> BBC News Online (2004) UK Consumer Debt Hits £1Trillion <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/3935671.stm> accessed 29.07.04

<sup>20</sup> Consumer Council (2005) Taking the Credit: Consumer Credit and Debt in Northern Ireland

<sup>21</sup> Credit Services Association Fact Sheet 3 [http://www.csa-uk.com/Factsheets/03\\_Students\\_FAQ.pdf](http://www.csa-uk.com/Factsheets/03_Students_FAQ.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> Department for Regional Development (2001) Shaping Our Future The Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland 2025.

<sup>23</sup> Belfast Telegraph (2005).

## 3. What needs to be done?

This event marked the formal beginning of the Consumer Council's commitment to engage with a wide range of stakeholders to help set our agenda for partnership action over the next three to five years. It was an opportunity to listen and learn from experts and delegates to see what this issue actually means for consumers and how we all can make more responsible choices now and in the future. The Consumer Council must now bring that learning together. This is only the start of a process that we hope will continue.

This section outlines the ideas identified in the conference and makes recommendations to key Government Departments, agencies and organisations in working together to promote and deliver on the issue of responsible consumer behaviour.

### Key messages

There must always be a link between policy and practice and multi-agency solutions are needed in order to take action. Everyone has the power to do something – we all have an obligation to make responsible choices and bring about change. Everyone should work together towards solutions.

### Governance issues

**Funding and resource:** Relevant agencies must have assurance of adequate and continuous funding and staffing to deliver the Northern Ireland Sustainable Development Strategy and its associated action plan.

**Leadership:** People want the Government to provide leadership on this issue and key organisations should campaign for stronger leadership on responsible consumer behaviour. There should be greater recognition of, and priority for, the issues at Government level. Joined-up thinking must be adopted by all key players and co-ordinated across all government departments. The Government must not only be the advocate for consumer change but challenge government policy in terms of sustainable development proofing.

**Meaningful consultation:** It is vital that consumers and their representatives are meaningfully involved in all policy decisions that affect them. There are better ways to collect, hear and express views. When people are given the facts simply they can make informed decisions.

**Policy development:** Policy and decision-makers should take sustainability into account. Policy should be introduced into education to encourage young people to communicate key messages at home.

**Joined-up policy:** There should be a fully integrated approach to sustainable development policy with other strategies like planning, health, education, water, transport and rural policies.

**Environmental governance:** Northern Ireland should have an independent, transparent and accountable Environmental Protection Agency to robustly protect and regulate the environment.

**Accountability:** It should be clear who owns and delivers the sustainable development objectives and targets and the implementation of the associated actions.

**Best practice:** Northern Ireland should adopt a co-ordinated approach to responsible consumer behaviour and learn from the many successful community, school and recycling projects offering lessons in international best practice.

**Public procurement:** The £3 billion spent by the Government on procurement equals almost 16 per cent of Northern Ireland's gross domestic product. This must be spent responsibly and sustainably.

**Renewables Strategy:** The Government should build on this strategy and extend it to include other utilities, for example water.

**Water and sewerage charges:** Bills for water and sewerage services should be based on measured charges and not the capital value of the property, which does not take into account ability to pay, water usage or incentives to save water as required by EU law.

**Building regulations:** Building regulations should be strengthened in terms of planning and energy and water efficiency. Developers should have financial incentives to build innovative and sustainable homes. For example, there is currently no VAT on new build but there is on refurbishment. This policy needs to be equalised to ensure there is no VAT on refurbishment. The Government should strive for an eco-homes standard that considers all efficiencies, particularly for social housing where they have direct influence.

**Publication policy:** Departments', agencies' and organisations' publications should be increasingly available on the Internet instead of paper copies. Where this is not possible, there should be more of a commitment to using recycled paper.

**Carbon off-setting:** Domestic and business consumers should offset the carbon dioxide they produce and try to make operations as carbon neutral as possible. Carbon offset projects neutralise the negative impacts that road and air travel have by calculating the carbon dioxide emissions created by a journey and investing in projects that prevent or remove an equivalent amount of emissions from the atmosphere<sup>24</sup>.

## Communication issues

**Communicating and engaging with consumers:** Policy and decision makers and others in positions of influence must communicate with consumers in language they understand. Consumers deserve clear, consistent messages about what they need to do to make informed responsible choices and behave more responsibly.

**Raising awareness:** There should be more effort to raise awareness of the benefits of responsible consumer choices and behaviour in order to achieve meaningful change. The DoE should invest in an awareness raising campaign to educate, excite and engage people with the responsible consumer behaviour message.

**Curriculum:** Sustainable Development should be an integral part of the school curriculum so that children think about sustainable choices in every aspect of their lives.

<sup>24</sup> A term used to describe projects that avoid or displace carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, for example energy efficiency, renewable energy, energy system decarbonisation and reforestation.

## Encouraging behavioural change

**Make it easy:** The Government must make it easy for people to behave responsibly and make responsible choices that deliver other benefits like saving money. As an example, by funding sustainability grants to encourage people to install loft insulation.

**Incentives:** There should be incentives in place to make people/businesses want to change their behaviour and consume less. Such incentives could include renewable energy uptake grants and the removal of VAT from sustainable goods and services.

**Collective action:** Work together to convince consumers that each person can really make a difference. By doing something small, people can make a greater impact together.



## 4. Making it happen collectively: Practical steps that should be taken

As well as the individual responsible choices we can make, the conference highlighted practical steps that people in positions of influence and authority could take. A collective approach is needed and the Consumer Council stands ready to play its part.

### The Consumer Council

The Consumer Council's aim is to encourage, inform and influence public debate and to represent all consumers. The Consumer Council is committed to the following actions:

**Consumer representation:** We will continue to represent consumers in this debate with our key partners. We will use the lessons learned from the conference and our involvement on this issue locally to continue to lead and inform the debate and to influence the Government to encourage long-term behavioural change.

**Consumer education:** We will work with others to move towards bridging the gap between consumer aspirations and protecting precious resources. We will work to empower consumers to have genuine choice, to make decisions about protecting the planet and making sure the goods and services they buy and help produce are sustainable. We will inform the development of the curriculum in this area and contribute resources through the education section of our website.

**Encourage responsible consumer behaviour:** We will help consumers nationally and further afield to understand the impact of their choices and encourage responsible behaviour through practical everyday steps. We will continue to use innovative projects like the successful Metro and Energy Challenges to encourage consumers to make responsible choices.

**Highlight conflicting Government policies:** We will identify and highlight contradictions or omissions in Government policies. An example of a contradiction of asking consumers to be water efficient without having a compulsory domestic water-metering scheme in place. Where economic, social and environmental factors conflict, the Government must decide which has primacy.

## The Government

As the principal decision taker and largest landowner and buyer, the Government and each of its departments, agencies and non-departmental public bodies should produce a sustainability policy and deliver the following actions urgently:

**Terminology:** Provide clear guidance on what 'sustainability' means and what products, services and behaviours are 'sustainable'.

**Strategy:** Publish the Sustainable Development Strategy for Northern Ireland and present the plan for engaging all stakeholders in the development, implementation and resourcing of an action plan with targets, outcomes and expected impacts. The associated action plan must enable the strategy to be delivered. The development and delivery of the strategy must take consumer opinions into account and explain the impact of people's choices on their lives.

**Government championing:** Sustainable Development needs a champion at the heart of Government that is responsible for ensuring commitment and a joined-up approach to sustainable development. Employees must have enough time and training to fully understand the new language and issues.

**Enabling choices:** Make it easier for people to make responsible choices by making the supply chain provide more responsible/sustainable products.

**Research and development:** Adequate Government funding is needed for research into consumer behaviour and to develop innovative, sustainable products and services.

**Public procurement:** The £3 billion spent by the Government on procurement equals almost 16 per cent of Northern Ireland's gross domestic product. This must be spent responsibly and sustainably.

**Statutory duty for energy efficiency:** Consideration should be given to a statutory duty for energy efficiency. There must be early translation of the *EU Energy Performance of Buildings Directive* into Northern Ireland legislation, so that consumers here have energy efficient homes that will be cheaper to run.

**Introduce widespread water metering:** People may continue to waste water if it is not measured. More widespread metering with in-built safeguards to protect certain consumer groups would promote the value of water and encourage wise water use.

**Public transport:** There should be sustained investment in public transport so that it is more reliable, punctual and attractive to everyone. Public transport in Northern Ireland should compare favourably with the EU level of subsidy per capita.

**Food and farming:** There should be further reform of food and agricultural policies to encourage more sustainable methods of farming, food production and consumption. In Northern Ireland the Food Strategy Implementation Partnership has helped to raise the profile of the agri-food sector and underline its important contribution to the restructuring of the Northern Ireland economy in the future.

**Raise consumer awareness about food:** Educate consumers to eat affordable, quality food in season; know where their food comes from; choose local produce and minimise food waste.

**Health promoting schools:** Make it easy for school children to make healthy choices by providing healthier school meals and banning vending machines that sell less healthy food.

**More focus on encouraging responsible consumption:** The Government should adopt policies that increase quality of life but substantially reduce consumption of resources and fossil fuels.

**Reduce consumer demand for non-essential packaging:** Encourage manufacturers and retailers to work together to reduce packaging.

**Plastic bag tax:** Introduce a plastic bag tax. While plastic bags make up only one per cent of waste by volume, this measure could help change consumer behaviour.

**Evaluation of progress:** Monitor, review and evaluate progress on the implementation of the strategy over its lifetime.

**Building regulations:** Building regulations should be strengthened in terms of planning and energy and water efficiency.

**Environmental governance:** Northern Ireland should have an independent, transparent and accountable Environmental Protection Agency to robustly protect and regulate the environment.

## The Planning Service

Planning policy affects where we live, shop, work and how we get there. Planning policies should consider the needs of people, the environment and links with other essential services like retail, transport and housing developments. The Planning Service should commit to the following actions:

**Review the planning system:** Sustainability should be prioritised in the planning agenda.

**Plan-led system:** Develop rigorous and consistently enforced plan-led systems that make better provision for housing, industrial and protective land use. Ensure plans connect infrastructure and services and provide better links with public transport. Accessible public transport for everyone should be a necessary part of any development proposal.

## Local Authorities

**Wider roles:** Local authorities should seek additional community planning powers so that consumers benefit from communities that are thriving, well-served, well connected, well designed and built, active, safe and inclusive.

**Encouraging behavioural change:** Reward schemes that encourage the use of sustainable products and recycling facilities should be explored.

**Household recycling:** Household recycling schemes should be widely available and easier to use. There should be a consistent approach to recycling across all local authorities.

## Schools



*Steve Costello and Sinéad McAroe, Globalclub.*

Schools can help young people develop responsible consumer behaviour that will last their lifetime. They should address the following actions:

**Whole school approach:** Sustainable Development should be an integral part of the school curriculum so that children think about sustainable choices in every aspect of their lives. Schools should adopt and resource a whole school approach to 'joined-up' sustainable initiatives by, for example, improving the nutritional status of school dinners, and introducing cookery classes, water and energy audits.

**Financial education:** Financial education should be strengthened and properly resourced: it should start at an early age and be reinforced throughout a child's education. Higher education students should have access to at least one financial management teaching session.

**New-build schools:** All new-build schools should be built to a sustainable development standard. This point applies equally to all Government-commissioned new-builds.

**Replicate successful food projects:** School-based sustainable development projects should be encouraged throughout the whole education system.

## Industry

Industry has exceptional scope to invest in research, innovation and promotion of low environmental impact products. Industry should act on the following areas:

**Product innovation:** Continue to innovate new products/services with lower environmental impacts. Raise environmental standards across all product ranges.

**Promoting sustainable choices:** Retailers should offer products with lower environmental impacts.

**Packaging:** Make greater use of smart, eco-friendly packaging to reduce excessive packaging.

**Water efficiency labels:** Devise water efficiency labels for water guzzling machines similar to energy efficient labels on electrical appliances.

**Food labelling:** Use more detailed food labelling to inform consumers' healthy food choices.

## Employers

Employers are in a position to affect employees' routine behaviours as well as their own business practices. They should undertake the following actions:

**Sustainable Transport Initiatives:** Increase work-based travel clubs and car sharing with incentives like free parking spaces to those who car share. Actively promote the use of public transport to/from work. Employers should provide multi-journey tickets to encourage staff to use public transport in the course of their work.

The targets identified for the Government – including building standards, water and energy efficiency, environmental audit standards and waste management and disposal – are equally applicable to business.

## Media

There is irrefutable proof that the media, particularly advertising, can affect purchasing decisions at both the brand and category levels. The media has the power to influence consumers in the messages and products they choose to make visually prominent. They should consider their ethical responsibilities as well as any profit obligations and demonstrate their commitment to social responsibility.

**Role models:** Promote more responsible behaviour by talking about the issues and showing how to be more responsible. Use celebrities to promote sustainable products.

## 5. A record of the speakers' input

The conference presentations looked at the global perspective, consumer choices and a local project that successfully exemplifies the principles of responsible consumer behaviour. This was followed by a youth perspective and a wide-ranging question and answer session.

The first presentation explained what it would take to live within the limits of our resources - one planet living.

### **Pooran Desai: One Planet Living - A framework to guide consumer choice**

*Pooran Desai is Director of BioRegional Development Group - an independent environmental organisation working with private, public and community sectors to use local resources to meet everyday needs. He is responsible for drawing together the partnership to construct BedZED, the UK's largest eco-village development. He is a director of the BioRegional and WWF joint initiative called "One Planet Living". In 2004, he was awarded an OBE for services to sustainable development. His presentation focused on BedZED - a successful sustainable living centre illustrating how people can live within the limits of our resources.*

Pooran's presentation tried to make the difficult idea of sustainable development real for people. He explained the concept of 'ecological footprinting' as the fact that we are using more land and sea resources than the planet can provide. This cannot go on. There are 1.9 hectares per person of land and sea yet in the UK our average ecological footprint is approximately six hectares each. This means that we would need three planets to support us if everyone in the world consumed as much as the average person in the UK.

The challenge of sustainability is to find ways of maintaining our current quality of life while reducing our consumption of resources and fossil fuels by two-thirds so we can adopt a *one-planet lifestyle*. His presentation explained how an eco-village in South London called Bedington Zero Fossil Energy Development (BedZED) aims to do just this.

BedZED households use renewable energy and have very energy-efficient homes. There is less need for commuting and public transport and car clubs are encouraged. The homes are designed to make recycling easy and more local seasonal organic produce is promoted. These activities can reduce participants' ecological footprint by about 50 per cent.

The challenge for the future is to roll this initiative out on a larger scale.

### **Professor Paul Jowitt: Sustainable Lifestyles - Making informed choices**

*Professor Paul Jowitt is Professor of Civil Engineering Systems and Executive Director of the Scottish Institute of Sustainable Technology - an institute specialising in research, policy development and education for sustainability at Heriot Watt University. His presentation traced our history and asked some soul-searching questions on what our actions as consumers mean in the wider context.*

Paul's presentation focused on how we got to where we are on climate change. He traced our evolution from primitive society to urbanisation. When science developed, we started to understand how to produce things and our supply chains got longer. Nowadays we largely rely on other people to do things for us, changing how we live, where we work and how we travel - all of which affect climate change.

This has led to the present day where we need to think about our impact on the earth. We already know we are living beyond our resources and if we don't do something about it in the next fifty years, we will be using between two and twenty times what the earth can supply.

Paul presented some blunt facts for the UK on how we are wasting resources. This compares poorly with the global context where disparities are rife. Between them, Britain, Europe and North America account for about 60 per cent of the world's consumption and about ten per cent of the world's population. In contrast, sub-Saharan Africa has about ten per cent of the world's population and accounts for only two per cent of the world's consumption.

As individuals we need to balance quality of life with what we want, the social impact and how we make these decisions. Individuals have an effect. We need to think about more sustainable issues and ask ourselves: What does sustainability mean for me as a consumer? What does it mean for me in my work? What does it mean for me as a citizen of the world? And what practical actions can I take?

The next presentation showed why we do not need to be overwhelmed in seeking to address these issues. The conference heard about a successful local initiative that explained how small steps can make a big difference in children's and families' lives while contributing to a better environment and future.

## Joe McGuinness: Fruit Co-operative Project

*Joe McGuinness is Principal of St Matthew's Primary School. The school has developed a school fruit co-op that encourages healthy eating and has been extended to embrace a whole school approach to health. St Matthew's Primary School won the 2005 award for Healthy Schools in Northern Ireland.*

Joe's presentation explained how simple, forward-looking steps to improve children's diets represent an effective model of sustainable development and how being a responsible consumer can start at an early age with the proper encouragement.

St Matthew's adopted a whole school approach to improve the children's diet and health. The school only allowed children to have milk, water or fruit at break time and they were not allowed to have sweets or chocolate bars in packed lunches. Fizzy drinks and some sugary drinks were banned at lunchtime. The fruit co-op uses fair trade sources and introduces the children to seasonal and exotic fruits. In addition, fruit is provided every day as an alternative in the dining hall and chips are restricted to once every ten days.

Sustainable development is made up of three elements – social, economic and environmental. The fruit co-operative demonstrates what can be done to satisfy all three. The health benefits of reaching Government health targets of eating five pieces of fruit per day satisfies the social element. The economic aspect is delivered through the efforts to link profits to individual pupil's credit union accounts and investing in a culture of saving. Composting fruit waste satisfies the environmental aspect. The conference then heard about the youth perspective of a global issue.

## **Sinéad McAroe: Through the eyes of a young consumer**

*Sinéad McAroe is the Youth Director for Education at Globalclub: a youth community in Northern Ireland that empowers children and young people to enhance citizenship, social inclusion, equality of opportunity and celebrate diversity amongst its membership. She is 15 years old and attends Mount Lourdes Grammar School in Enniskillen. One of 15 Youth Directors within Globalclub, Sinéad's job is to lead and manage different aspects of the Globalclub service. Her presentation gave the youth perspective on what it means to be a responsible consumer.*

Sinéad focused on how young people are equal consumers and how our choices should reflect our responsibility towards the global common good because the youth of today are the global citizens of tomorrow.

She explained that young people care about sustainability because the choices we make today affect our future. We must recycle, use renewable energy and resources and not continue to exploit the world's depleting resources.

Being honest and up front about the issues can make responsible consumer behaviour attractive to young people and encourage them to change their behaviour. Young people need information to make informed choices and understand what we are doing to our world and how we can change.

The presentations ended with an explanation of why it is important to engage with young people to ultimately bring about responsible consumer behaviour and choices.

## **Lester Manley: Through the eyes of a young consumer**

*Lester Manley is Director of Globalclub. His presentation discussed the merits of educating, exciting and engaging with young consumers.*

Lester's presentation asked policy and decision makers to listen to young people's views. He explained the merits of the "Three Es" model - educating, exciting, and engaging. By educating young people they will understand the issues and the benefits of action; then you have to excite them about the information you have given them; and then you have to engage them to have impact. If we want to communicate effectively to the most receptive audience we need to engage with the youth of this world who are a significant influence on parents and peers, and who are also big spenders and have a big influence on parental spending.

## 6. Conclusion

We believe that the attendance at our conference proves that people feel passionately about the subject of sustainability and the part we play in striving to make more responsible choices and live more sustainable lives.

Everyone agreed that that it is rare to get the opportunity to interact with such a wide cross-section of people and learn from each other's expertise. We believe that this conference was a milestone for Northern Ireland and demonstrated a level of timeliness for engaging on this issue.

We hope that the commitment and interest shown on the day will merit working together over the next three to five years. We note a sense of readiness to take small steps and make small changes in our everyday lives that can deliver big benefits for Northern Ireland and generations to come.

This report is not a definitive action plan to progress the issue of responsible consumer behaviour. Similarly, the commitment to action extends beyond the Consumer Council to many more people. The conference and report are the start of our work on responsible consumer behaviour and the Consumer Council will continue to influence policy makers and decision takers. We stand ready to work on this agenda with other organisations and people who are prepared to make a contribution to the issue.

# APPENDIX 1

## The Consumer Council's Sustainability Policies

### Environment

The Consumer Council has an unavoidable impact on the environment. We seek to minimise negative impact and maximise positive impact through our choice of work and suppliers. We aim to "tread lightly" by using public transport and recycled materials where possible.

### Society

- We are members of Business in the Community Northern Ireland. Members commit to making an impact across four themes - the environment, workplace, social and economic through:
  - Managing, measuring and integrating responsible business practice throughout their business;
  - Working in partnership to tackle disadvantage;
  - Inspiring, innovating and leading by sharing learning and experience;
  - In addition to project work and as part of our research and development, we try to make more general contributions to public debates and encourage all employees to do the same.

### Economy

- We contribute to the UK economy through creating employment, paying taxes, entering partnerships, fostering networks, contributing to debate and through our choice of work.
- We aim to promote the wider understanding of responsible choices and the development of a sustainable economy at local, national and global level.

### Employees in the Workplace Policy Statement

- The Consumer Council will ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare at work of all its employees.
- The Consumer Council has renewed its *Investors in People* accreditation.

### Purchase of Goods and Services

- The Consumer Council will buy less environmentally damaging goods and services where it makes financial sense to do so in the following areas:

## Energy

- The Consumer Council sources its electricity supply from a green electricity supplier and uses a green tariff;
- All photocopiers have timers to switch them off when not in use; and
- All PCs are PAT-tested (portable appliance testing) to comply with the relevant standards for energy efficiency and electrical safety.

## Water

- We use dual flush toilets to minimise water use.

## Paper

- The Consumer Council prints reports double sided and has used recycled paper for this event and report. Recycled paper has a minimum of 50 per cent of the fibre coming from well-managed forests independently certified according to the rules of the Forest Stewardship Council [FSC].

## Waste Minimisation

- Staff are encouraged to recycle paper. There are recycle bins in every office.
- We recycle toner cartridges for charity.

## Transport

- The Consumer Council provides bike storage for employees.
- The Consumer Council encourages staff to use public transport for meetings where possible with its purchase of Translink multi-journey cards.







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