



Corporate Responsibility and Sustainability Strategy

(as part of The Consumer Council's Corporate Plan 2016-2021)

December 2019

Introduction

Corporate Responsibility is concerned with how an organisation meets/exceeds its minimum obligations to stakeholders, specified through regulation. There is also a growing recognition that organisations need to take account of the social and ethical impact of their business decisions on the wider competitive environment.

In looking at key issues for any organisation, it is useful to focus on whether the purpose of that organisation and its strategy is for the benefit of the primary stakeholder group or to a wider group of stakeholders.

Our Mission

We are committed to promoting and safeguarding the interests of consumers in Northern Ireland by empowering them and providing a strong representative voice to policy-makers, regulators and service providers.

Our Values

- **Ambition** – We seek to deliver the best possible deal for consumers in Northern Ireland;
- **Excellence** – We will ensure our work is robust and considered, and bears comparison with the best;
- **Commitment** – We will provide consumers in Northern Ireland with the best possible service;
- **Fairness** – We will listen to everyone and respect all consumers’ concerns;
- **Teamwork** – We will work in a collegiate manner;
- **Honesty** – We will operate openly and transparently;
- **Integrity** – We seek to be trustworthy and trusted; and
- **Objectivity** – We will base our conclusions in evidence.

How we Work

To achieve an impact, it is imperative that the work of The Consumer Council is both authoritative and credible. Our legitimacy is determined by the extent to which we demonstrably connect into consumer experience, support our analysis with evidence, and have suitable quality controls.

We work in partnership with other stakeholders to ensure consumers feel empowered throughout each part of their “consumer journey”. Over this corporate planning period (2016-2021) we will look to further develop strategic partnerships and strengthen data sharing to expand the awareness of consumer information/advice/education provision, and the overall understanding of consumer needs in Northern Ireland.

Consumer Principles

The Consumer Council uses the eight principles which were adopted by the United Nations in the 1970s in its Guidelines for Consumer Protection as “eight consumer rights”. In April 2013, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) stated that, “the Guidelines remain a valid and relevant document for consumer protection policy and have inspired a significant number of national consumer protection laws”.

These principles allow us to champion consistent and transparent policy positions across a diverse range of subject areas, and to operate confidently and effectively when new or unfamiliar issues arise. They also provide a straightforward way of explaining to stakeholders how we identify and analyse consumer issues.

Figure 1: Consumer Principles



Internal and External Stakeholders

The table below shows how some of the core Corporate Responsibility areas addressed by The Consumer Council can map across both internal and external stakeholders.

Table 1: The Corporate Responsibility of The Consumer Council with External and Internal Stakeholders

External Aspects		Internal Aspects	
<u>Employment</u>	Promoting equality of opportunity and good relations across all equality categories.	<u>Working Conditions</u>	Promoting Diversity, Learning and Development, Staff Wellbeing, Staff Security, Disability Confident. Promoting where possible ¹ sustainable workplace activities like active travel, recycling and energy saving.

¹ The Consumer Council as an Arms-Length Body of the Department of the Economy often has to work within overall NICS procurement contracts.

	Using where possible our procurement processes to engage with local contractors (e.g. Loaf Catering part of the NOW Group) who support sustainable practices (environment, equality and fair employment practices).		
Human Rights/Values	Promoting good relations through integrity, accurate communications, community focused services, and consumer focused technology. Ensuring our statutory commitment to vulnerable consumers ² , diverse consumers ³ and rural consumers ⁴	Employee Welfare	HR Policies (which incorporate diversity, flexible working etc), staff benefits, fair employment terms and conditions, and fair employment practices.
Products	Through The Consumer Council's values	Job Design	Enhancing personal value and development experience through opportunities on in-house projects, working groups (sustainability, diversity, health and safety, active travel etc.).
Community Activity	Education, Volunteering, Donations, Sponsorship	Community Activity	Fundraising (NEA, Save the Children, Bryson, NOW Group etc.) and volunteering (time to read etc.)

Corporate Plan 2016-2021

The Consumer Council's Corporate Plan for the period 2016-2021 provides the strategic direction for the organisation. It is based around five main objectives:

- Objective 1: To Empower Consumers;
- Objective 2: To Represent Consumers;
- Objective 3: To Protect Consumers;
- Objective 4: To Understand the Needs of Future Consumers and Sustainable Consumption; and
- Objective 5: To Provide Value for Money and Good Governance.

The key corporate responsibility issues in relation to these issues are:

Objective	Strategic Aim	Our response
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² Consumers who are disabled or chronically sick; of pensionable age; with low incomes; or who reside in rural areas.

³ Northern Ireland Act (Section 75) 1998.

⁴ Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016.

<p>1. To Empower Consumers</p>	<p>To inform consumers and businesses about their consumer rights and responsibilities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To increase the number of partnership memorandums agreed to provide consumer information, advice and education; • To monitor and increase the number of requests for information and resources (via all media); • To measure the number of businesses that have accurate water bills; • To increase the number of hits to The Consumer Council’s website; • To increase the number of hits to The Consumer Council’s switching tools; • To increase the time individuals spend on The Consumer Council’s website; • To increase the number of followers/shares of The Consumer Council’s social media output (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn); • To monitor the quality (NPS Score) and number of training and outreach sessions provided; • To increase consumers’ awareness of the role of The Consumer Council and its support services (qualitative data through participant evaluations); and • To monitor and increase the number of social media, newspaper, journal and magazine articles, and TV/radio interviews around consumer issues.
<p>2. To Represent Consumers</p>	<p>To express and defend consumers’ opinions, and to build a consumer protection framework that encourages high standards and economic growth.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To develop and increase our Social Media Engagement; • To increase the number of social media, newspaper, journal and magazine articles, and TV/radio interviews on consumer issues; • To increase the number of complaints successfully resolved; • To increase the number of recommendations made by The Consumer Council that are adopted by service providers; • To increase the number of policies that are changed as a result of representation by The Consumer Council; • To develop an agreed approach for price controls with consumer involvement methodologies in place, resulting in a consumer-focused regulatory process for future price controls; and • To increased consumer satisfaction with energy, postal, transport and water service providers.

<p>3. To Protect Consumers</p>	<p>To advocate for individuals who have cause for complaint and to ensure high consumer protection standards for consumers in Northern Ireland.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To increase the number of enquiries received; • To increase the number of complaints received; • To increase the number of referrals to TSSNI/Consumerline; • To increase awareness of The Consumer Council's complaint role and knowledge of how to make a complaint (qualitative data through participant evaluations); • To evaluate and understand the different demographic groups and geographic areas that contact The Consumer Council for assistance; • To monitor the number of complaints received in relation to door-step selling; • To increase the number of energy, postal service, transport and water complaints received; • To evaluate consumer awareness of energy companies' information for consumers; and • To increase the number of complaints processed on-line.
<p>4. To understand the Needs of Future Consumers and Sustainable Consumption</p>	<p>To understand the needs of both current and future consumers; and to promote sustainable consumption.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To undertake qualitative survey data on the current and future needs of consumers in Northern Ireland; • To produce and publish qualitative survey data on the unique and distinct features of the NI consumer landscape; and • To develop The Consumer Council as a "thought leader" in this strategic area.
<p>5. To Provide Value for Money and Good Governance</p>	<p>To provide a high quality and an accountable service for all citizens in Northern Ireland.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To receive an unqualified audit report from the Northern Ireland Audit Office; • To implement all internal audit recommendations; • To maintain The Consumer Council's Customer Service Excellence accreditation; • To comply with GDPR; • To increase usage of online channels to access The Consumer Council's services and information; and • To increase the percentage of people satisfied with the services of The Consumer Council.

Our Corporate Responsibility Activities and Future Plans

The Consumer Council is a member of Business in the Community (BITC). We work to achieve the BITC CORE Accreditation which focuses on:

- Planet;
- People;

- Place;
- Marketplace Responsibility;
- Stakeholder Engagement; and
- Responsible Leadership.

In these five areas, The Consumer Council undertakes the following activities:

	Current Activities	Future Plans
Planet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage consumers and stakeholders to undertake sustainable activities (energy efficiency tool). • Where possible undertake sustainable procurement with local suppliers. • Encourage staff to undertake sustainable activities including active travel, recycling, and energy efficiency. • All staff are trained through NEA to NVQ Level 3 City and Guilds in Energy Efficiency. • Development of energy and water efficiency tools and guidance on website. • We encourage the use of public transport, and provide staff with a Translink travel card to travel to meetings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We will continue to encourage environmentally ethical behaviour in the organisation and our workforce. • We will further encourage and support active travel and car sharing. • We will join the Belfast Bike Scheme to further encourage active travel. • We will look to undertake sustainable procurement in-line with Government guidelines.
People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the workplace we support equality of opportunity and diversity, both in our dealings with customers and stakeholders and also across the organisation. • We aim to create a workplace that is inclusive, inspiring and supportive for staff. • We invest in staff training and development. • We support a healthy, motivated workforce with wellbeing activities, annual health checks, free flu vaccines/eye tests/membership of Kingsbridge Healthcare Diamond Club, reduced gym membership, cycle to work schemes, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work towards: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ IIP Gold Accreditation; ○ Diversity Charter Mark – Silver Accreditation; ○ Cycle Friendly Employer – Silver Award ○ Best Place to Work Standard. ○ Disability Confident Accreditation • We will continue to invest in staff and encourage learning and development through our refreshed HR and Learning and Development strategy. • We will ensure staff recognise their roles and the part they play through the revised performance management system that is supported by learning and development. • Wellbeing activities will continue to be provided and we will consult with staff to ascertain what activities they would like offered. • We will continue to listen to staff through regular communication forums and feedback surveys.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We provide staff with personal security training and undertake monthly health and safety inspections. • We recognise and listen to staff concerns through staff forums and staff surveys. • To develop a values lead organisation which is built on recognised best-practice standards (BITC, IIP, Customer Service Excellence, Diversity Mark, ISO, and British Standards). • Development of website comparison tools (energy, banking, budgeting, fuel, postal services). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support the role out of the JAM Card initiative to service providers. • We will continue to listen to staff through regular communication forums and feedback survey.
Place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undertaking and supporting staff in volunteering activities e.g. Board appointments, community initiatives, time to read, silver surfers, World Kindness Day etc. • Undertaking and supporting staff in fundraising activities (NEA, Bryson, Save the Children) • Working to support consumers in Northern Ireland, especially those more vulnerable in our society. • Focusing on developing the Consumer Principles into work of regulators, service providers, and policy-makers. • Ensuring adequate and accessible Post Office, ATM and bank branch provision in Northern Ireland. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We will encourage staff to engage with BITC's and other organisations volunteering activities. • We will work to ensure consumers, especially the most vulnerable in our society do not get left behind, and can fairly access the services and information that they need. • We will work to develop consumer trust with service providers. • We will work to achieve BS18477 standard on inclusive service provision.
Marketplace Responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We actively monitor and assert our statutory powers to promote and safeguard the needs of consumers in the marketplace. • We actively engage with consumers through community events such as the Consumer Parliament, Regional Assemblies, and community events. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We will encourage service providers to undertake BS18477 accreditation on inclusive service provision. • We will undertake "audits" of service providers (energy, water and transport) consumer complaints processes and ensure they cater for the most vulnerable in our society.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We have encouraged service providers to sign up the JAM Card initiative, and undertake training in consumer rights. 	
Stakeholder Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We actively monitor stakeholder engagement and report this at Board Level. We have a stakeholder engagement strategy. We actively develop partnerships and MOUs with organisations in order to improve consumer advice and rights in Northern Ireland. We ensure GB Stakeholders (Government, Regulators, Service Providers) have a good understanding of the needs and circumstances of consumers in Northern Ireland. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We will continue to actively engage with stakeholders in order to safeguard and promote the interests of consumers in Northern Ireland. We will continue to provide evidence to stakeholders of specific needs and circumstances of consumers in Northern Ireland, especially the most vulnerable in our society.
Responsible Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We have worked to develop a values based culture within The Consumer Council. All line managers will undertake leadership training through Women in Business or via Common Purpose. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For managers to undertake BITC's Responsible Business Management Training. We will investigate the Chartered Manager programme for all managers in the Wider Leadership Team.



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