

**THREE HUNDRED AND TWELFTH MEETING OF THE GENERAL CONSUMER COUNCIL FOR NORTHERN IRELAND HELD ON FRIDAY 3 SEPTEMBER 2021 AT 10.00AM IN THE CLAYTON HOTEL, BELFAST AND VIA ZOOM TELECONFERENCE**

**312/1.1****ATTENDANCE**

Ms Sheila McClelland	Chair
Mr Mick McAteer	Deputy Chair
Mrs June Butler	
Dr Sinead Furey	
Ms Amanda Logan	
Dr Joan Martin	
Mr Gerry McCurdy	

**IN ATTENDANCE**

Ms Noyona Chundur	Chief Executive Officer (Except agenda item 312/5.1)
Mr Scott Kennerley	Director of Financial, Communications and Digital Services (Except agenda item 312/5.1)
Mr William Warke	Director of Corporate Services (Except agenda item 312/5.1)
Mr Peter McClenaghan	Director of Sustainability & Infrastructure (Except agenda item 312/5.1)
Mr Raymond Gormley	Head of Energy (Except agenda item 312/5.1)
Mr Michael Legg	Head of Postal Services (Except agenda item 312/5.1)
Mr Graham Smith	Head of Water (Except agenda item 312/5.1)
Ms Sharon Doherty	Head of Communications (Except agenda item 312/5.1)
Ms Hannah Brown	Senior Policy Officer, Transport (Except agenda item 312/5.1)
Ms Rachel Coulter	Research Assistant (Except agenda item 312/5.1)
Ms Fiona Lavery	Personal Assistant (Except agenda item 312/5.1)
Ms Julie Coulter	Administrative Officer (Except agenda item 312/5.1)

Audit and Risk Stakeholders

**BY INVITATION**

Ms Karen Beattie	NI Audit Office
Ms Maire Caldwell	DfE Internal Audit
Mr Dennis Cunningham	DfE Sponsor Branch
Mr Matthew Kaye	PwC
Mr Barry McLeod	DfE Sponsor Branch

**APOLOGIES**

Apologies were received from Lynne Crowther, William Leathem and Alan O'Neill.

**312/1.2****DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The Chair advised Board Members that any conflict of interest relating to agenda items should be recorded at the beginning of Council meetings. Should a Board Member have a conflict of interest they should leave the meeting at that particular agenda item and the minutes would reflect this.

She explained the Chair would have the ability to define a conflict of interest and requested Board Members' compliance if this arose.

No Board Members declared a conflict of interest on any agenda item.

**312/1.3**

**Draft 2020-2021 Annual Report and Accounts**

**312/1.4**

**Draft 2020-2021 Report To Those Charged With Governance**

The Chair welcomed Audit and Risk Committee (ARAC) stakeholders to the meeting.

Ms Karen Beattie, Northern Ireland Audit Office, reminded Board Members the Draft 2020-2021 Annual Report and Accounts would normally be presented to ARAC for approval before being tabled at the main Board Meeting. Due to the audit timetable, they were being ratified by the full Board, which included ARAC Members.

Mr Matthew Kaye, PwC, presented the Draft 2020-2021 Report to Those Charged with Governance, and informed Board Members the timetable of the audit of the Consumer Council financial statements for the year ended 31 March 2021 had been delayed due to the capacity in the Finance Team. He thanked the Chief Executive, Director of Corporate Services and Finance Team for their help during the difficult circumstances.

He confirmed that there had been no Priority 1 audit recommendations, and stated that subject to appropriate requested amendments, the Accounting Officer should sign the Annual Report and Accounts. He asked the Committee to consider the section at the foot of page 2 of the report, namely confirming that they had reviewed the findings of the report and they noted that there were no uncorrected misstatements to consider.

Mr Kaye stated that it was recommended the Consumer Council should focus on staff handover policies in place in a bid to ensure continuity of knowledge and experience in the event of key staff exits. This would improve the quality and timing of annual report and financial statement disclosures, along with supporting work papers to be provided for future audits.

The Chief Executive highlighted these challenges were due to unprecedented levels of staff attrition in the Finance Team, coupled with the scarcity of specialist skills in the labour market, impacting many organisations, making it difficult to fill vacant posts. She confirmed a policy review would be undertaken, and include measures for handover.

A discussion took place about timeliness experienced with some shared services used by the Consumer Council, in particular HR Connect, and the difficulties this placed on organisational capacity and responsiveness. The Chief Executive said she would formally bring the matter to the next Oversight and Liaison meeting with DfE.

After further discussion, Board Members thanked ARAC stakeholders for their input and involvement in the finalisation of the report and they approved the draft 2020-2021 Annual Report and Accounts.

The ARAC stakeholders left the meeting at 10.50am.

After further discussion, it was agreed that a review of the annual audit should be undertaken to capture lessons learnt and improve internal processes.

Amanda Logan left the meeting at 11am.

### **312/1.5**      **MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 25 June 2021, having been circulated, were agreed as a true and correct record.

The minutes were agreed and signed.

### **312/1.6**      **ACTIONS FROM THE LAST MEETING**

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

### **312/1.7**      **MATTERS ARISING**

There were no matters arising.

### **312/1.8**      **CHAIR'S VERBAL UPDATE**

#### **312/1.8.1**      **Recruitment**

The Chair informed Board Members that recruitment for the posts of Director of Strategy and Emerging Markets and Head of Strategy and Emerging Markets was currently on-going. Members were advised that a number of fixed term posts are currently in place, due to uncertainty in funding for work streams until March 2022.

#### **312/1.8.2**      **Board Away Day**

The Chair advised that Lisa Manselli had provided a report which accurately reflected the proceedings of the Board Away Day that was held on 20 August. She informed Members that Ms Manselli would facilitate the Staff Away Day on 8 October and would also attend the October Board Meeting or Policy Group Meeting.

## **2.              PRESENTATION**

Hannah Brown and Rachel Coulter presented the Consumer Council's new Transport Knowledge Hub, an interactive tool containing data on air and ferry fares, fuel prices and commuter costs collected by the organisation for a number of years.

Members were advised the purpose of the Hub was to present all available data through accessible dashboards, rather than advocate specific arguments for transport options. The Hub will be presented to Translink before going live.

Members praised the use of the data in a robust, clear and user friendly format, and suggested the same could be done for other areas of the Consumer Council's remit, and stressed the importance of keeping the information up to date and relevant.

**3. ITEMS FOR APPROVAL****312/3.1 2021-2022 Corporate Scorecard: Quarter 1**

Ms Noleen Charnley highlighted the only targets not met were those that were the responsibility of NI Direct, however there had been small improvements in service delivery. Members expressed doubt whether alternative arrangements that were more competitively priced than NI Direct could be procured.

Members approved the 2021-2022 Corporate Scorecard: Quarter 1.

**312/3.2 Management Accounts: July 2021**

Mr William Warke presented the paper, highlighting tenders and procurements in the near future, and some slippage in employment costs and recruitment. He advised that pragmatic profiling of all sections' budgets was taking place and these would be closely managed.

The Chief Executive advised that there would be an update to the Board at the November meeting on the Consumer Council's final position and budget surrenders as part of the January Monitoring Round.

Members approved the Management Accounts: July 2021.

**312/3.3 Stakeholder Engagement Reporting Tool**

Mr Peter McClenaghan explained that the reporting tool had been devised to capture and retain usable data on stakeholder engagement and relationships, across individual directorates.

Members commented on the systematic breadth of the information to be collected and cautioned on the labour intensive nature of maintaining such a document.

The Chair suggested following discussion at the Staff Away Day on 8 October, the reporting tool should be further refined to balance the data collected with the administrative burden of collecting and maintaining the data, and brought to the Board meeting in November.

It was also suggested that a version of the reporting tool would be of interest to ARAC as well as the Board.

Members agreed this approach.

**312/3.4 Response to BEIS Consultations on Competition and Consumer Policy**

Members were advised that following the previous evening's policy meeting, the framework for the two consultation responses would be revisited and a subcommittee of three Board Members (Sheila McClelland, Mick McAteer and Sinéad Furey) would review final responses, before they are brought to the full Board for approval.

The Chief Executive confirmed the Consumer Council would be asking BEIS for an extension to the submission deadline.

Members approved this approach.

312/3.5 Proposed 2022 Meeting Dates

Members approved the proposed dates and the standing agenda items for the main Board and its subcommittees.

**4. ITEMS FOR NOTING**

312/4.1 Chief Executive's Report: September 2021

The Chief Executive presented the Chief Executive's Report to Board Members and highlighted the key issues arising.

Board Members were content with the new format and noted the Chief Executive's Report.

312/4.2 Consolidated 2020-2021 NI Protocol Research and Presentation to Consumer Protection Partnership Strategy Group

Mr Michael Legg introduced the research report, highlighting that it has been used in a number of stakeholder briefings including the BEIS Consumer Protection Partnership Strategy Group, and in a written briefing to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

Members discussed the anecdotal difference in appeals to disability payments between Northern Ireland and Great Britain, and advised that figures from the Department for Communities (DoC) could be used. The Chief Executive confirmed the data sources used were the same as the sources used by DoC. Members also cautioned on the importance of political sensitivities when launching this research publically.

Members noted the research.

312/4.3 2021-2022 Change Management Programme

Members noted the paper.

312/4.4 2020-2021 Annual Enquiries and Complaints Report

Members noted the report.

312/4.5 2020-2021 Annual Review of Infrastructure and Sustainable Development

Mr Peter McClenaghan introduced the report drew attention to some activities and successes during the reporting the period. The Chair highlighted the importance of continued monitoring of events over the coming months in light if the continued increases in energy prices, to keep pace of anticipated changes in key consumer issues.

Members noted the report.

312/4.6 2020-2021 Annual Review of Financial and Postal Services and Food Policy

Mr Scott Kennerley introduced the report drew attention to some activities and successes during the reporting the period.

Members were advised of work ongoing in the Postal Services Team with retailers to reinstate deliveries of some goods to Northern Ireland, and Members highlighted the importance of stressing Northern Ireland’s position within the United Kingdom.

Member noted the report.

**312/5 ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

There was no other business and all officers left the meeting at this point.

312/5.1 Review of the Meeting

**SHEILA TO PROVIDE DETAILS OF THE REVIEW OF THE MEETING.**

**311/5 DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting will be held on Friday 15 October 2021 at 10am via either Zoom Conference or physical venue, subject to COVID-19 restrictions.

There was no further business and the meeting closed at 1.20pm.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_