



Campaigning for Consumers
14th Annual Report



GENERAL • CONSUMER • COUNCIL
for Northern Ireland

Chairman's Introduction



Too often in the past the interests of consumers have been sidelined. The voices of others are louder and receive greater recognition. So the task for all of us in the consumer movement is to work to make consumer issues central to a whole range of decision making - not easy when numbers are small and resources tight.

One way to maximise our resources to the benefit of the Northern Ireland consumer is through greater co-operation between local consumer organisations. This is happening. I believe that the new Consumer Organisations' page in both the Phone Book and Yellow Pages is a fundamental step, brilliant in its simplicity. Over time consumers will know to turn to the special page whenever they need to check out where to get help.

Another fruitful development was the organisation of a day's training in consumer representation for members of the Northern Ireland Advisory Committee on Telecommunications and the Post Office Users' Council. We were delighted to have been able to help in making the arrangements and look forward to further joint projects of this nature. A core of well trained consumer representatives in touch both with today's issues and one another has tremendous potential to bring about change in favour of consumers.

The Council has been working with the Trading Standards Service for some years on ventures such as the Young Consumers' Competition. More recently joint exhibitions have been mounted. Now both organisations consider the time is right to expand the number of things we tackle together.

When the Council was first set up, the Government of the day gave a commitment that consumers in Northern Ireland should have as good protection as consumers in other parts of the UK. Currently the Government at Westminster is working on a new consumer strategy. This will ensure that the consumer perspective is recognised and becomes part of mainstream public policy. We believe that a high level strategy of this nature will endorse our role of giving consumers a voice, raising the profile of consumer affairs and campaigning for a fair deal.

We look forward to the prospect of a local administration. We understand that many demands are likely to be made on a new Assembly but see an opportunity for building on what has been achieved so far and bringing benefit to local consumers as a result.

I am most grateful for all the support which members and staff have given me throughout the year. I particularly wish to thank the out-going Deputy Chairman, David Gray, for his wise counsel over the past two years. I welcome his successor, Felicity Huston, and the energy and enthusiasm which she brings to the job. With the support of the Department of Economic Development I look forward to reporting on continued development and success.

JOAN WHITESIDE OBE
Chairman

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Executive Summary

A STRATEGY FOR CONSUMERS

The Council has drawn up a strategy for the years 1998 to 2001. Our corporate plan is based on a framework of consumer principles and sets the following five strategic aims.

1. Improve standards

The Council will seek to change for the better the conditions under which public and private sector goods and services are provided.

2. Give consumers a voice

The Council will speak out on behalf of consumers, ensure their interests are articulated and defended, and in certain circumstances act as an advocate for individuals with cause for complaint.

3. Promote awareness of rights

The Council will encourage and assist consumers to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to make choices and to enable them to feel confident about taking independent action in pursuit of their rights.

4. Influence public policies

The Council will seek to ensure that public policies are developed with their potential effect on people as consumers in mind and that their contribution to consumer well-being is recognised as an important policy goal.

5. Be an effective organisation

The Council will be committed to developing the potential for its members and staff, will ensure that its image is one of independence and integrity, and will manage its affairs efficiently and effectively and in accordance with the requirements for corporate and public accountability.

In seeking to achieve these aims the Council will pay particular attention to ten priority sectors. Full details are in the Corporate Plan which is available from the Council.

This report shows how the Council has been working to bring about changes which benefit consumers and gives an account of how we have spent our resources.

- Food safety has been top of the agenda and rarely out of the headlines. We have called for caution regarding the genetic modification of food, tighter controls, and segregation of GM and conventional ingredients throughout the food chain.
- We have called for the present laws and controls regarding salmonella in eggs to be strengthened. We want to see greater clarity about the roles and responsibilities of the various food safety bodies including the Food Standards Agency.
- We want to see a new public authority for water and have rejected water metering as a basis of charging for domestic supply.
- At our suggestion eight leading consumer protection bodies came together for the first time to take a full-page advertisement in the Yellow Pages and the Phone Book. We supplied a laminated copy to every member of the new Northern Ireland Assembly as a ready reference guide.
- In a further effort to boost awareness of consumer rights we produced *Walk on the Wise Side*, a loose leaf guide to consumer problems and distributed copies to Citizens Advice Bureaux, other advice centres, libraries and schools.
- Natural gas provides a new choice of fuel which we would like to see extended to as many parts of Northern Ireland as possible. In our watchdog role we pressed Phoenix to introduce better systems for payment, especially for pre-payment and "pay as you go".
- Also with Phoenix we negotiated a package of standards, each with a performance target. Details of our role were included for the first time on the back of all gas bills.
- We distributed a fuel safety card to 130,000 homes in Northern Ireland giving, among other things, advice about carbon monoxide.
- We have been alarmed at the deteriorating situation regarding funding for public transport. Less than half the amount of Government money is available for bus and rail in Northern Ireland compared with Britain.

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- We welcomed the decision to give consumer interests a higher priority in the regulation of utilities and look forward to taking on the wider role of representing all energy consumers in Northern Ireland.
 - Following a lengthy campaign we secured the introduction of a new code of practice by the two main caravan trade associations and the OFT. The code gives more and better rights to caravan owners.
 - Our report Homing in on Buying a House identified the need to reform the process. There were problems with delays, the discovery of unexpected defects in existing property and dissatisfaction with newly built houses.
 - There were significant increases in the number of complaints investigated by the Council regarding gas, coal and transport. 93% said they were either satisfied or very satisfied with our handling of their complaint.

Looking Ahead

In the year ahead the Council will:

- Make recommendations to increase the financial limit of the Small Claims Court;
- Continue to speak out on behalf of passengers;
- Examine the level of knowledge and awareness about food safety;
- Make recommendations to improve the provision of information for passengers on public transport;
- Check up on the experience of those who are using gas;
- Investigate the cost of living for low income consumers;
- Respond to proposals for Civil Justice Reform;
- Look at the cost of car insurance for young drivers.

Review of the Year



Joan Whiteside, Chairman of the General Consumer Council, Robbie Millar, owner of Shanks Restaurant and Michael Bell, Executive Director of the NI Food and Drink Association tuck in at the NI Food and Drink Innovation Awards ceremony.

Food

Food safety has been top of the agenda and rarely out of the headlines. The Council has consistently represented the consumer viewpoint to Government and the food industry.

Genetic Modification

Certain developments in food science and technology have heightened concerns about the safety of food. Given current levels of knowledge the Consumer Council does not oppose genetic modification (GM) in itself but calls for caution and tight controls. We want to see further research together with proper monitoring and surveillance of trial crops. There should be segregation of GM and conventional ingredients throughout the food chain. Where approval is granted, food should be clearly labelled so that consumers have choice.

Salmonella in Eggs

During the year a number of food poisoning incidents were attributed to eggs produced in Northern Ireland. We called for the present laws and controls to be strengthened. Consumers have a right to expect that all eggs are produced to the highest possible standard. We also want to see action to achieve the same standards in relation to salmonella in poultry.

Food Standards Agency/ Food Safety Promotion Board

The consumer movement has been very concerned about the apparent delay in setting up the United Kingdom Food Standards Agency. The Council responded to the Government's Draft Bill and to proposals for an all-Ireland Food Safety Promotion Board. In welcoming the proposals, we emphasised the need for greater clarity about the roles and responsibilities of the various food safety bodies and committees, including lines of accountability. We also called for consumers to be represented within the new arrangements.

Common Agriculture Policy Reform

Believing that reform of the Common Agricultural Policy was long overdue, we supported the Agenda 2000 proposals but would have liked to see them go further. The progressive reduction of price support in favour of direct measures is welcome in principle. However, consumers will benefit only if this is reflected in lower shop prices. We also called for direct support to be progressively reduced and for the payments to be targeted towards encouraging sustainable agriculture and improving competitiveness.

“Consumers don’t want a re-run of BSE or E-Coli. They want assurances that they won’t be exposed in future to new risks from technologies such as genetic modification.”



Water and Sewerage Services

Changes in the Water Service should not be brought about by privatisation but by its transformation into a new Northern Ireland Public Water Authority. We rejected water metering as a basis for charging for domestic supply preferring the present system of paying through the regional rate. The new water authority, we consider, should be regulated effectively and the views of water users properly represented.

Other Action

Public concern over food issues was reflected in our involvement across a wide range of food and related issues. Among other things we:

- supplied information to the Office of Fair Trading's investigation into supermarkets;
- carried out research into consumer satisfaction with food and grocery shopping following the arrival of the large supermarkets;
- gave written evidence to the BSE Enquiry;
- contributed to special information days for Assembly Members;
- held meetings with the Ulster Farmers Union, Tesco, Sainsbury, DHSS, Department of Agriculture and the Food Safety Authority of Ireland ;
- put forward views on a range of issues including the labelling of GM foods; a review of the Public Analyst arrangements; cattle traceability and the Veterinary Service Code of Practice; and
- made presentations to a number of professional and other organisations at their invitation.

“It would cost millions to install a water meter in every house when the money could be better spent elsewhere”.



CONSUMER INFORMATION

Consumers in the Dark

Consumers with cause for complaint do not know who to contact; in fact, they show an alarming lack of awareness of watchdog bodies. This was the worrying finding in our research on consumer rights, redress and proficiency. The subsequent publication - *Consumers in the Dark* - showed that people are quite prepared to take action to resolve their complaints. However, they cannot do so effectively because they don't know enough about their rights and, more particularly, about which organisation to contact for help and advice. The youngest and oldest age groups and those at risk from poverty were least aware of their rights. As a result we are targeting initiatives to raise awareness of consumer organisations.

Yellow Pages/Phone Book Advertisement

During the year a number of Northern Ireland's consumer protection bodies came together at our suggestion, for the first time ever, to take a full page advertisement in Yellow Pages and the BT directory. The advertisement is under Consumer Organisations in both publications.

The organisations involved were: Citizens Advice Bureaux, Environmental Health, the General Consumer Council, the Health and Social Services Councils, the Northern Ireland Ombudsman, OFREG, and the Trading Standards Service. Together we sponsored advertising on TV and radio at peak times to draw attention to the initiative.

Walk on the Wise Side

In a further effort to boost awareness of consumer rights we produced *Walk on the Wise Side*, a loose-leaf guide to consumer problems. It offers practical guidance on how to sort out typical consumer difficulties and has been designed for advice workers and the general public. With the support of all 26 local authorities, we distributed copies to CABx, Independent Advice Centres, libraries and schools.



Joan Whiteside, Chairman of the General Consumer Council shows the Council's latest educational resource, an advice directory, to Mervyn Carrick, Mayor of Craigavon Borough Council and Peter O'Hagan, Mayor of Lisburn Borough Council.

Natural Gas

As the official body protecting the interests of gas consumers we are delighted at the decision by Phoenix to accelerate the provision of natural gas in the greater Belfast area. Gas provides a new choice of fuel and we would like to see this choice extended to as many parts of Northern Ireland as possible.

Payment Options

As the gas industry develops and connects more customers, it is vital that there is a choice of methods for people to pay their bill. Currently Phoenix only offer a choice of monthly direct debit, quarterly payment and a limited voucher book scheme. This is not enough. We made strong representations to Phoenix to increase the number of options, especially a pre-payment option. We are particularly concerned about consumers falling into debt because they cannot pay as they go.

Misleading Advertising

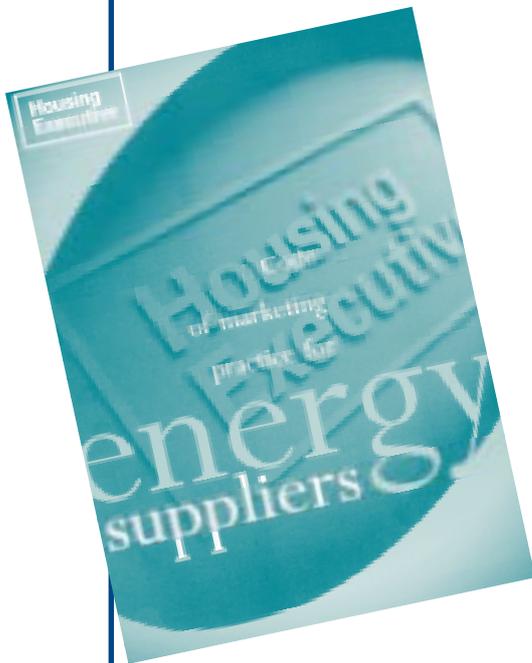
Accurate and reliable information is most important when making comparisons between the running costs of different types of home heating systems. Unfortunately, with hot competition between fuels in the Belfast area in particular, misleading claims were flying around. Together with the Housing Executive we launched a code of practice aimed at preventing the use of inaccurate or unreliable marketing information. The Council and the Executive jointly administer the code, investigating and adjudicating on complaints.

Customer Contract

Having rejected the first version of Phoenix's contract with its customers as legally unenforceable, we were able to reach agreement on a substantially revised contract, which complied with all legal requirements. Phoenix agreed to print the new contract on the back of the customer's application form for gas supply. They also agreed to replace the contracts of all existing customers.

Standards of Performance

The gas licence requires Phoenix to set and report on standards of performance. After a lengthy process, we successfully negotiated a package of standards with Phoenix. They cover such things as responding to customer enquiries and complaints, reading meters and dealing with safety incidents. Each standard has a performance target - for example, 90% of letters should receive a reply within 10 working days. The standards will be monitored and reported on yearly.



Publicising the Council's Role

Consumers need to know where to go for help if they have a complaint and are unable to resolve it with the supplier. During the year we widely advertised our role in handling gas and certain other complaints. Further details about this campaign appear on page 8. At our suggestion Phoenix agreed to put details about our role on the back of the gas bill. In addition, our fuel safety card highlighted the role of the Council in representing gas consumers.

Fuel Safety Card

Last year we identified a lack of knowledge about the dangers of carbon monoxide poisoning from heating appliances. Consumers were not generally aware that carbon monoxide was odourless, tasteless and colourless. Indeed, three quarters (76%) of coal users did not know that carbon monoxide has no smell. On top of that, very few knew whom to contact for help if carbon monoxide fumes were suspected.



Maeve Bell, Director and Alan Walker, Assistant Consumer Affairs Officer of the General Consumer Council together with Kim Howells, Consumer Affairs Minister at the Department of Trade and Industry, Pat Mallon, member of the Council and Joan Whiteside Chairman at the launch of the Council's Fuel Safety Card.

Carbon monoxide can occur with any fuel (coal, oil, gas or wood) and is not limited to glass fronted fires, a common misconception in Northern Ireland.

Given our concern we produced a fuel safety information card; it also advised consumers about our role in handling complaints about coal or gas. The card was sent to 130,000 Housing Executive homes and to CAB offices and Environmental Health Offices throughout Northern Ireland. Consumer Affairs Minister, Kim Howells MP launched the card, on his first visit to Northern Ireland in November 1998.

Customer Service Issues

The Council discussed a range of other important issues with Phoenix, including prices, metering, security of supply, safety, the millennium bug, and the roll out of the gas network.

Meetings

We held three formal liaison meetings with Phoenix Natural Gas and a similar number with the Director General of Gas for Northern Ireland. Our staff were also frequently in contact with Phoenix and the Regulator's office (Ofreg) on gas related matters.

The Council received £14,812 from Ofreg towards its work for gas consumers; this money was immediately refunded to the Department. The main expenses in connection with gas were staff time; other expenses included a contribution towards publicity and the fuel safety card.

“Consumers here already pay well above the UK average for fuel, light and power. We don’t want to see the poorest among them hit twice because of the method they use to pay their bill”.

Energy - the wider picture

Utility Regulation

If energy markets are to work to the benefit of all consumers, strong independent regulation is needed. For this reason, we welcomed the Government’s Green Paper *A Fair Deal for Consumers: Modernising the Framework for Utility Regulation*. This proposed placing a primary duty on regulators requiring them to protect the interests of consumers. We supported this along with the proposal for independent consumer committees with responsibility to deal with complaints.

The Green Paper proposed that the Northern Ireland Consumer Committee for Electricity should be merged with the General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland and a single energy committee established within the Council. The Council strongly supports the proposal and looks forward to taking on the wider role of representing all energy consumers.

Coal

Progress was made on a number of the recommendations contained in our report, *Burning Issues: Consumers and Coal*.

In October 1998 two new regulations were introduced. The first banned the sale, or delivery, of unauthorised fuels in smoke control areas while the second limited the sulphur content of solid fuel for domestic use. However, some loopholes may remain in the regulations allowing bituminous coal to be sold in smoke control areas. This needs to be resolved quickly.

The Council was pleased to see the Housing Executive introduce the sweeping of tenants’ chimneys, once a year, as part of its revised maintenance programme for solid fuel appliances.

Representing Consumers

We continue to represent the interests of energy consumers on the following organisations:

- National Home Energy Efficiency Partnership
- Home Energy Conservation Authority, Advisory Panel
- Foyle Regional Energy Agency, Management Committee
- Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme, Advisory Group
- Energy 2000 Forum

Consultations

We made a submission on energy policy as part of the overall review of economic policy by the Department of Economic Development. Among other things, we set out our views on extending the gas network, reducing electricity prices, electricity interconnection on an all island basis and energy efficiency.

We also replied to the paper “Reducing the Cost of Generating Electricity in Northern Ireland - the Generators’ Proposals” . We strongly supported the Director General of Electricity Supply in his attempts to tackle the high cost of electricity.

TRANSPORT

Bus and Rail

Our public transport system is caught in a downward spiral. Infrequent services and poor quality buses and trains result in fewer passengers. This in turn means less revenue to make improvements or contain fares. Services cannot be sustained when the number of trips taken drops by 6% year on year.

No less an authority than the Northern Ireland Audit Office has confirmed that government funding for bus and for rail in Northern Ireland is less than half the amount provided in Great Britain.

This is an alarming situation. We have campaigned for vigorous action to give effect to the Government's declared policy of favouring public transport. We have highlighted the results of an official survey of bus and rail passengers which showed further declines in the perceptions of the service. We protested again in March 1999 when most bus and rail fares were increased by more than the rate of inflation.

However, there have also been improvements, some of which we have been advocating for quite a time. These include:

- the repair of the rail track between Belfast and Bangor and the building of a combined bus and rail station in Bangor,
- the start of projects to develop safe routes to school for cycling and walking,
- orders for 138 new buses and the introduction of cleaner diesel, a new bus station at Armagh and construction of another underway at Newry,
- additional rural bus services launched with the support of the Rural Transport Fund.

But much more is needed to halt the decline in our bus and rail service.

Ferry Services

Following our criticism of fare increases in 1997 we were pleased that the ferry companies reduced the cost of peak sailings for the summer 1998 season. However, it is disappointing that off peak fares continued to rise by up to 11%.

A number of customer-friendly improvements promoted by us were made by ferry companies, such as Stena's introduction of a customer comment card on the HSS ferry. Travellers also enjoy a wider choice of routes with Seacat's introduction of new services to Troon and Heysham and expansion by Norse Irish Ferries on the route to Liverpool.

"Subsidies in Northern Ireland are less than half of those paid in Great Britain".



Bertie Corbet of Irish Rail, Maeve Bell, General Consumer Council, and Ted Hesketh from Translink show off the passenger Charter for the Enterprise service between Belfast and Dublin.



Felicity Houston, member of the General Consumer Council, 'cleaning up' with Christopher Connolly and Philip Johnston under the watchful eyes of her dogs, Tikka and Channa.

Walking Environment

The walking environment matters not only to those making journeys on foot but also to those going by bus or train. Following our report *What's Wrong with Walking?*, the Government has promised to set up a 'Walking Forum' to oversee new policy initiatives.

We published *Litter and Dog Dirt: a Consumer Clean Up*. Three quarters of consumers regard this as a problem and three in ten consider it to be a major problem. The report identified further action for cleaner pavements that the DOE and local councils should consider.

Our streets and shopping areas must be available to all consumers including those with limited mobility. In our view proposals for widespread pedestrianisation of Belfast City Centre compromised this principle. We called for arrangements that improved the environment for pedestrians without denying access for the disabled. A decision by the Appeals Commission is expected shortly.

Air Services

We voiced passenger concerns on a number of issues. We called on the Office of Fair Trading to investigate the new practice by airlines of costing the 'passenger service charge' separately because it has confused passengers and has sometimes been used to disguise fare increases.

We argued on behalf of local passengers before the House of Commons Transport Committee on the necessity for high frequency services to London Heathrow. The Government subsequently specified Northern Ireland as one of the regions to be included in its inquiry into regional services.

There has been progress in a number of areas where we had noted weaknesses in our 1995 report, *Plain Sailing*:

- a major investment programme at Belfast City Airport which will benefit users,
- better food and drink facilities and menus at Belfast International Airport,
- Jersey European's timetable now includes information on whom to contact with a comment or complaint.
- the start of easyJet services offering lower cost travel options.

Road Service Licence Applications

In Northern Ireland the DOE licenses bus services. In the case of disputed services the Council has a role in making a recommendation before the Department takes a final decision about the licence.

One application was referred to us; it was to run a stage carriage service from the Balinlea Road to Ballymoney, providing six round trips daily except on Sundays. Ulsterbus lodged an objection. The Council did not support the application judging that the needs of most passengers on the route were already adequately served and that competition would have an adverse effect on existing stage carriage services. The DOE accepted our recommendation.

Goods and private services

Buying a Home

In February the Council published *Homing in on buying a house: a consultation report on improving the process in Northern Ireland*. It looked at how people coped with the most difficult and expensive transaction they are ever likely to undertake. Some 1,500 recent house buyers were surveyed, equivalent to 8% of house sales in 1997.

A variety of problem areas were identified such as poor after sales care by builders, confusion about property surveys, and delays in getting a contract. One in four who bought an existing house found defects after moving in while the same proportion who bought a newly built house were dissatisfied with the builder. Our report outlines possible ways to make the process easier and we have called on solicitors, estate agents and others to consider our suggestions.

The Council's consultation report prompted 35 substantive responses from professionals, local councils and others on how to improve the process. We will consider these in coming up with recommendations for change.



Caravans

Our long campaign to stand up for the rights of holiday caravan owners received a major boost with the introduction of a new Code of Practice. The Code gives more and better rights to caravan owners and sets out what they are entitled to.

We had previously received complaints about:

- Big increases in site fees unrelated to any improvements
- Not being able to resell the caravan on site
- Having to pay huge commission to site owners
- No complaints mechanism

Members of the two main caravan trade associations (NCC and BHPA¹) are applying the Code of Practice. We have advised caravan owners to check if their site operator is a member of a trade association before signing up to any new agreement to stay on site.

After twenty years of campaigning, this looks like real progress. However, we will be watching the situation closely to see if it improves.

¹ National Caravan Council and the British Holiday and Home Parks Association.



OTHER ISSUES

Policing

In order to highlight the fact that policing is about the provision of a public service, we made a submission to the independent Commission on Policing. We recommended that policing in Northern Ireland should be delivered in the context of the nine principles of Service First; these include consultation, openness, fair treatment and setting standards of service.

Student housing

New Guidelines aimed at improving student housing and building better relationships between students and their landlords should benefit both parties. Students will benefit because the Guidelines help them make a wise choice about a place to live and state what a good landlord should provide. The responsibilities of students as tenants are also set out clearly. We produced the guidelines in co-operation with the Housing Executive, the Housing Rights Service, Queen's University, the University of Ulster and Belfast City Council.

Subsequently we took part in Queen's University's housing information day organised to assist students and their landlords.

Abolition of Duty Free sales between EU countries

In response to media claims that ferry and air fares would rise after the withdrawal of duty free sales the Council said that this should not be so. We pointed out that ferry services here have traditionally been more expensive because they were not subsidised by duty free income and that no increase should result from the withdrawal. Similarly, air passengers should not be expected to pay more when the vast majority of flights from the Province are to Britain and have not derived a duty free income.



SPOT THE FAKE! Said Eamonn McPartland and Anthony Haughan of Trading Standards Branch while Dawn Livingstone, member of the Consumer Council and Carol Edwards, Education Officer examine counterfeit goods during a consumer exhibition in Enniskillen library.



Monitoring Consumer Expectations

Each year we hold one of our Council meetings away from Belfast so that we can meet local people and hear at first hand about their concerns. About 60 people attended a most successful event and lunch in Craigavon thanks to the kind hospitality of the Borough Council to whom we are most grateful.

Listening Organisations

In September 1998 the Council carried out a snapshot of public opinion to find out which organisations were regarded as being the best listeners according to consumers. Family Doctors came out as the best listeners to the public. BT and the banks came second and third. Public Sector organisations including the Housing Executive, DoE and District Councils scored lowest.

In response the DOE allowed us to write an article in their in-house magazine to encourage their staff to improve their listening skills with the public.

Consumer Network

A network of about 50 volunteers spread across Northern Ireland help us to keep our fingers on the pulse of local concern. One project they and their friends helped us with in the past year was checking the cost of school uniforms. High costs are a particular problem for pupils from disadvantaged areas. Once again, the biggest problem is the cost of a blazer. Grammar schools are the worst offenders. We repeated our recommendation that schools should simplify their uniforms and offer a choice of more than one supplier in order to cut costs.

Complaints & Representations

Gas

We dealt with 39 representations about natural gas during the year a threefold increase on 1997/98. Most of the increase came as the result of our Fuel Safety card being distributed throughout Northern Ireland.

“93% of complainants were satisfied with the way the Council handled their complaint”.

Subject Matter	Total 1998/99
Billing Query	6
Payment Options	2
Installation Work	6
Roadworks	3
Network Development	4
Connection to Network	5
Appliance Related Complaint	5
Appliance Retailing	1
Prices/Tariffs/Charges	1
Information Requests	5
Miscellaneous	1
Total	39

Of these 18 were first stage², 3 were second stage and 18 were enquiries or requests for information.

Problems with bills include consumers who did not receive bills for up to six months after being connected. While the individual complaints were resolved, Phoenix need to take urgent action so that an unnecessary debt problem is not created.

Information about when homes could be connected to gas has also proved unsatisfactory for some consumers. Phoenix had been using entire postal code areas, eg BT14, to tell residents when gas would be available in their area. With post codes covering such large areas, gas could not be made available everywhere simultaneously. As the result of complaints Phoenix have changed their system to advise which streets will be considered for natural gas and when. The information is updated monthly and gives the planned programme for the next six months.

While Phoenix may not be responsible for problems relating to appliances or installation, they need to be aware that such problems reflect on their industry and to try and work with installers and the Housing Executive to minimise the number of problems that occur.

Coal

The number of coal related representations increased 149% during the year, largely due to the impact of our fuel safety card.

Subject Matter	Total 1997/98	Total 1998/99
Appliance Related Problems	14	50
Quality	10	17
Fumes	4	5
Price	2	11
Miscellaneous	9	14
Total	39	97

² First Stage - Complaints and enquiries where the consumer contacts GCC, without first taking the matter up with the company concerned. In such circumstances we pass the complaints on for investigation and request copies. We then follow up with the complainants to ask if they are satisfied. If not, the complaint then becomes second stage.

Second Stage - Complaints where the consumer has been unable to obtain a satisfactory response from the company concerned.

The complaints about quality were taken up with the suppliers concerned and in most cases were satisfactorily resolved. In one case a number of complaints were received about the quality of Grade 'A' Esse. We discovered that, as a result of official restrictions on importing coal from Germany, the coal importers had started buying their supplies from a coal mine in Wales. The problem was resolved with the transfer to a new washing process in Wales.

Five consumers made contact as a result of suspecting carbon monoxide fumes. In such cases the Council provides immediate safety advice and contacts. The low number of people contacting us on this issue does not change the fact that coal users should continue to have their chimneys swept twice a year and throatplates cleaned once a month to minimise the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning.

A price rise in June 1998 took many consumers by surprise and was the subject of a number of complaints. Consumers complained about the increase occurring during the summer months and also that the increase was not publicised as widely as usual to allow stocking up before the increase took effect.

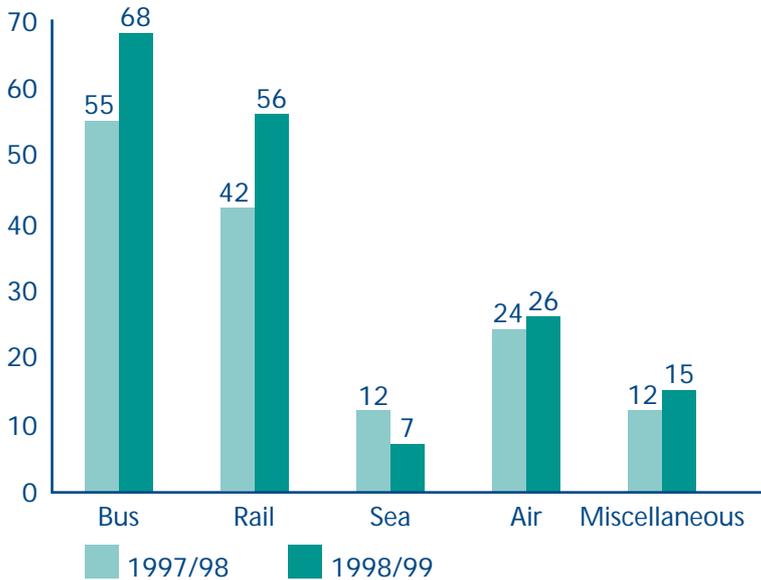
Around half the representations were about fires and other appliances. They were referred to the appropriate Housing Executive district office.

“Prior to getting in touch with you I was getting vague promises that Mr So and So would reply to me. He never did. You however obtained a speedy response. Indeed I am most grateful”.

Transport

One hundred and seventy-two people contacted the Council with a complaint about transport, an increase of 19% on the previous year and a new high for the Council. Caution should be exercised in drawing conclusions from the figures because the various providers differ in the scale of their operations and the number of passengers carried.

Transport Representations 1998/99 compared with 1997/98



* 1 bus complaint and 1 rail complaint related to English transport operators and not Translink.

Thirty-nine of the complaints about buses and twenty-eight about trains were classified as first stage.

Serious delays and poor information about them helped bring about the increase in rail complaints received during the year. Many have stemmed from the major track relaying work between Belfast and Lisburn. With more major engineering work planned, the company need, as a minimum, to ensure that accurate and timely information is given to passengers throughout the period of disruption.

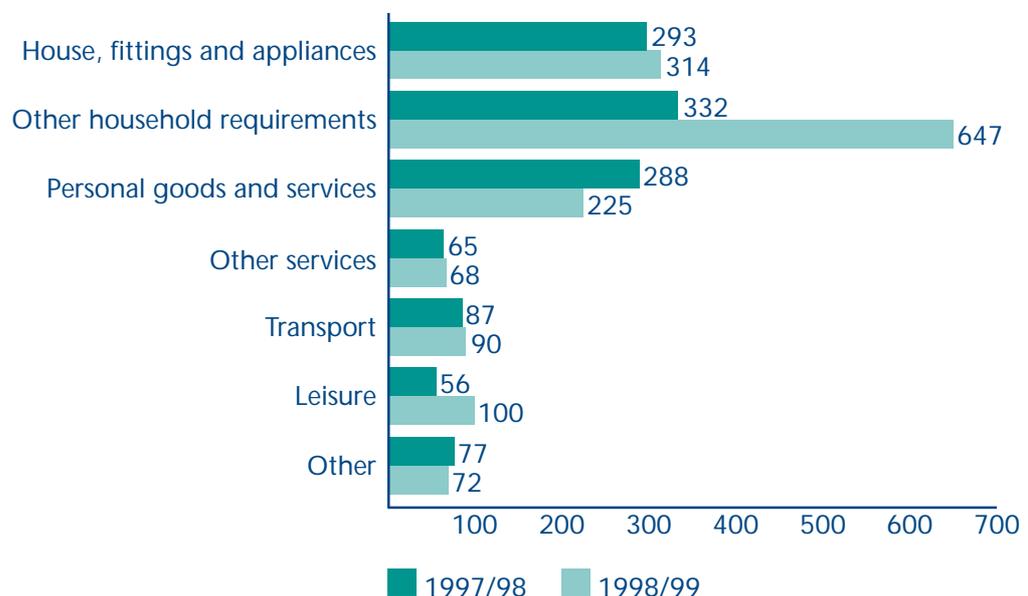
While a wide variety of complaints were made about bus services, some at least could be remedied without recourse to major capital expenditure. Buses driving past passengers at stops continue to be a problem, particularly in Belfast. Some of the problems occur when more than one bus approaches a stop at the same time and the second bus overtakes without waiting to see if any passengers wish to use its route. Translink needs to address this and other problems.

The decision by some airlines to separate the cost of the airport Passenger Service Charge caused a number of complaints. Those who complained had been told that this charge was a new tax despite the fact that it has always been a component of airline fares. We raised the issue with the Office of Fair Trading and exchanged information with other consumer protection bodies.

General

Although the Council cannot act as an advice agency and has to refer people to other more appropriate organisations, it is understandable that many people get in touch to ask for advice. During the year 1491 people contacted us about problems, an increase of 15%. We hope that in future the new combined advertisement in the Phone Book and Yellow Pages will help consumers to find the right organisation first time.

General Representations received 1998/99 compared with 1997/98





Public Affairs

In a year of political development for Northern Ireland, we have been anxious to support Assembly members in their work. We offered a short presentation on consumer issues to all the political parties and were very pleased to welcome several of them to the offices. We provided a summary of the Annual Report and a laminated copy of the consumer organisations' display advertisement for ready reference.

During the year the Chairman and staff took part in 29 television and 77 radio interviews, an increase on the previous year. There were also some 380 mentions in the daily and weekly press.

Mr John Bridgeman, Director General of Fair Trading, gave a lecture to an invited audience in Belfast City Hall; we are most grateful to the City Council for their generous assistance.

Staff organised exhibitions in both Connswater and Craigavon shopping centres in the autumn and a joint exhibition with Trading Standards in Enniskillen Library.

The Chairman, Joan Whiteside, acted as a judge for the Innovation Awards organised by the NI Food and Drink Association. She spoke at a conference on consultation and complaints and on a number of occasions about food and farming matters. We were happy to provide speakers for a number of student, business and community groups throughout the year.

We contributed to the production of the Chief Executives Forum guidelines *Communicating for Success* which aims to help smaller organisations with their communications strategies.

About the Council

Performance Indicators 1999-2001

Aims

Improve Standards

Influence Public Policy

66% of organisations to which the Council has addressed views, proposals or recommendations to agree that they have been influenced by them or taken into account.

Aim

Give Consumers a Voice

(a) - Complaints

90% of complainants to be satisfied with the way GCC has handled their complaint.

(b) - Research

70% of key constituencies to be satisfied regarding the quality of the Council's research.

(c) - Representing the Consumer View

Feedback from conferences, speeches etc. to have an 80% overall favourable rating.

75% of those surveyed who know something about the Council to agree that it does good work for consumers.

Aim

Promote Awareness of Rights

80% of teachers and advisors using training and/or resources provided by the Council to agree that they have been helped in their work towards improving knowledge of consumer rights.

Awareness of consumer organisations among the DE socio economic group to be raised from a score of 12 to 14 by year 2001.

Aim

Be an Effective Organisation

Submit the Annual Accounts by 31 May and the Annual Report by 31 July.

GCC to finish the year within 2% of its grant in aid.

Not to have any formal complaints to the Council upheld either internally or by the Ombudsman.

90% of key constituencies to be satisfied regarding the Council's openness and accountability.

The General Consumer Council's task is to promote and safeguard the interests of consumers in Northern Ireland. Set up by statute, the Council is funded by the Department of Economic Development.

Since 1985 the Council has given consumers a voice. We carry out research, promote awareness of consumer rights, seek to influence both public and private sectors, and campaign for a fair deal. In addition to some specific duties in relation to energy, transport and food, we investigate and speak out on the important consumer issues of the day. We also take up individual complaints about passenger transport, coal and natural gas.

Membership

The Council comprises a Chairman, Deputy Chairman and twelve members appointed following ministerial approval. Joan Whiteside has been Chairman since January 1997. Felicity Huston succeeded David Gray as Deputy Chairman in February 1999. Currently there are 8 full time and 3 part time members of staff led by the Director, Maeve Bell.

The Council met 10 times during the year. The Energy and the Transport Group each met four times while the Food and Consumer Education Groups met five times. The Council's General Purposes Committee meets as and when required.

The Council has links with other consumer organisations especially the National Consumer Council (NCC) and the Scottish and Welsh Consumer Councils. The Chairman is a member of NCC. The Council is also a member of Consumer Congress and the Consumers in Europe Group.

Accountability

The Council is committed to being open in the way it carries out its work.

Minutes of Council meetings are available on request. Registers of both interests and of gifts and hospitality are open for public inspection. The Council has adopted a code of practice for members, a code of openness, and a code for staff.

We publish an annual report giving details of our activities and the outcomes we have achieved. The report also contains the statement of accounts which are subject to independent external audit and to scrutiny by the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Our standards of service are published in a Charter Statement which is also available in a large print format and on tape.

The Council has set up an Audit Committee to help promote the highest standards of propriety in our use of public funds and has made arrangements for internal audits to be carried out.

The Council has a formal written complaints procedure and comes within the ambit of the Ombudsman.

Each year we survey consumers who come to the Council for help with complaints. Our target is that 90% should be satisfied with our service. Ninety-three per cent said that they were either satisfied or very satisfied with our handling of their complaint. In addition, 93% said that we dealt with their complaints either quickly or very quickly, an increase from 81% the previous year.



Members

Mrs Joan Whiteside OBE, Chairman

Mrs Whiteside has extensive experience of consumer affairs and served as the first Chairman of the Northern Ireland Consumer Committee for Electricity for five years. She formerly lectured in consumer law at North Down College of Further Education. Mrs Whiteside is a member of the Lord Chancellor's Advisory Committee on Legal Aid and a General Commissioner for Income Tax. She is a member of the Lord Chancellor's Civil Justice Reform Group.

Felicity Huston, Deputy Chairman from February 1999

Felicity Huston is a partner in a firm of Tax Consultants and Accountants in Belfast. She is a member of the Post Office Users' Council of Northern Ireland, and was a member of the Personal Investment Authority's Consumer Panel until its dissolution in December 1998. She serves on the Board of Clifton House, is a member of the Industrial Tribunals and the NI Charities Advisory Committee. She chairs the Council's Energy Group.

David Gray, Deputy Chairman to February 1999

Living near Holywood David Gray is a partner with a Belfast firm of solicitors. A wheelchair user following a rugby accident at school, he has a very personal interest in the needs of the disabled consumer and is Deputy Chairman of the Northern Ireland Disability Council.

Ciaran Brolly

Ciaran Brolly is a senior lecturer in Human Resource Management and Trade Union Studies at the North West Institute of Further and Higher Education in Londonderry. He is the Manager of the Institute's Health and Safety Training and Development Unit and is also Director of a local medium-sized engineering firm.

Ann Collins

Ann Collins lives in Newtownabbey. She is a member of the Transport Advisory Committee of Disability Action which promotes the interests of people with disabilities, the Co-ordinator of Shopmobility Belfast and also Secretary of the Northern Ireland Group of the Disabled Drivers' Association.

Daniel Corr

Living in Lurgan Dan Corr is Northern Ireland Manager of a major Building Society. He is past Chairman of the Building Societies Association and Council of Mortgage Lenders for Northern Ireland. He is on the Boards of the Northern Ireland Co-ownership Housing Association, Belfast Common Purpose, and Business in the Community (NI). He chairs the Council's Transport Group.

Mark Gavin

Mark Gavin is Chief Executive of the Community Information Network. Formerly with the NI Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux, he also worked in the advice sector in Enniskillen, Omagh and Derry. Mark is a member of the Northern Ireland Secretariat of the Buttle Trust. He lives in Carryduff.

Dawn Livingstone

Dawn Livingstone is Director of the Share Centre in Lisnaskea, County Fermanagh, a residential activity centre dedicated to promoting opportunities for the integration of able bodied and physically and mentally challenged people. Mrs Livingstone is also the Northern Ireland Trustee of the Family Fund Trust.

Pat Mallon

Living in Lurgan Pat Mallon is a member of Craigavon Borough Council. She is a health support worker by profession. Mrs Mallon is Chairperson of the Board of Governors of St Peter's Primary School, Lurgan and a member of the NI Housing Executive Southern Region Consumer Panel.

Brian Oliphant

Living in Magherafelt Brian Oliphant is Group Chief Environmental Health Officer of the Western Group Environmental Health Service. He is a Governor of Rainey Endowed School and chairs their Finance Committee.

He also chairs the Food and Education Groups. From September 1998 he has been seconded as Fund Manager of the Omagh Fund for one year.

Bill Osborne

Director of Voluntary Service Belfast, Bill Osborne is a member of the National Lottery Charities Board, a Trustee of the Sydney Stewart Memorial Trust and a committee member of the Northern Ireland Prince's Trust.

Denis Smith

Denis Smith is Chairman of the Belfast Development Agency, a member of the Fair Employment Tribunal, and the Chairman of Portview Trade Centre. He is a past President of Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce. He lives in North Down and chairs the Council's Audit Committee.

Michael Walker

Michael Walker is the resident Public Analyst and a partner in a Belfast firm of consulting chemists. He lives in Newtownabbey and his interests include hillwalking, mountaineering and youth work.

Jacqueline Weir

Jackie Weir is Headmistress of Wellington College, a co-educational school in Belfast. She has had experience of teaching young offenders and is currently a member of Amnesty International and the Admiralty Interview Board.

Rory McShane (Resigned June 1998)

Rory McShane lives in South Down. He is a solicitor with offices in Newry and Kilkeel and has a wide number of interests including education, finance and economics, sport, tourism and human rights.

Jane Wilde, to 31 December 1998

Jane Wilde is currently Director of the Institute of Public Health in Ireland. A public health doctor, she was Executive Director of the Health Promotion Agency until 1995 and has a particular interest in the promotion of health in local communities. She lives near Purdysburn, Belfast.

Register of Members' Interests

A Register of Members' Interests, and of Gifts and Hospitality is available for inspection on request.

LIST OF MEMBERS' ATTENDANCE AT MEETINGS

Number of Council meetings April 1997 to March 1998: 10

Mrs Joan Whiteside	9
Mr David Gray	6
Mr Ciaran Brolly	5
Mrs Ann Collins	6
Mr Dan Corr	8
Mr Mark Gavin	10
Mrs Felicity Huston	8
Mrs Dawn Livingstone	7
Rory McShane (Resigned June 1998)	0
Mrs Pat Mallon	9
Mr Brian Oliphant	9
Mr Bill Osborne	1 (Appointed Feb 99)
Mr Denis Smith	5
Mr Michael Walker	2 (Appointed Feb 99)
Mrs Jacqueline Weir	5
Dr Jane Wilde	6 (To Dec 98)

Members also attended committee meetings throughout the year.

Staff

Maeve Bell	Director
Sam Miskelly	Assistant Director
Carol Edwards	Consumer Affairs Officer - Education
Wesley Henderson	Consumer Affairs Officer - Research
Lillian Buchanan	Consumer Affairs Officer
Alison Hawthorne	Finance/Administration Officer (part time)
Alan Walker	Assistant Consumer Affairs Officer
Deirdre Barker	Senior Personal Secretary
Christine Russell Stafford	Clerk Typist
June Feeney	Receptionist/Typist (part-time)
Heather Hamilton	Receptionist/Typist (part-time)

Organisation

Representative

Nominated by GCC to represent the Council

Belfast City Airport Forum	Mark Gavin
City of Derry Airport Consultative Committee	Ciaran Brolly
Consumers in Europe Group	Mark Gavin
Consumers In Europe Group - Food Committee	Jane Wilde
Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme - Advisory Group	Wesley Henderson
Foyle Regional Energy Agency	Wesley Henderson
Home Energy Conservation Authority - Advisory Panel	Wesley Henderson
Working Committee for the EC	
Transportation Sub-Programme 1994-99	Maeve Bell
NI Housing Executive - Community Association Handbook Working Group	Sam Miskelly
NI Home Accident Prevention Council	Denis Smith
Monitoring Group on Transport Charters	Lillian Buchanan
Research and Development Strategy Committee of Dept. of Agriculture	Jane Wilde
Review of Communicable Diseases Project Board	Jane Wilde
Regional Advisory Committee on Communicable Diseases	Joan Whiteside
UK Consumer Education Group (NCC)	Carol Edwards

Name put forward by GCC but position held in individual capacity

Civil Justice Review Group	Joan Whiteside
MAFF Consumer Panel	Jane Wilde
Personal Investment Authority Consumer Panel	Felicity Huston

List of Publications from 1993

Reports

- Homing In On Buying A House - A Consultation Paper (1999)
- Consumers in the Dark (1998)
- Litter and Dog Dirt - A Consumer Clean Up (1998)
- What's Wrong with Walking? (1997)
- Burning Issues: Consumers and Coal (1997)
- Taking Taxis (1997)
- Cross Border Shopping in the Island of Ireland (1996)
- The Cover Story - Car Insurance Costs in Northern Ireland (1996)
- Student Housing in Northern Ireland (1996)
- Buying Selling and Borrowing; third edition (1996)
- Plain Sailing (1995)
- Customer Complaints - Putting Things Right (1995)
- Turning Over a New Leaf - The Public Library Service (1995)
- Static Holiday Caravans (1995)
- The Transfer Procedure (1994)
- Handling Food Scares: Policies and Perceptions (1993)
- The Impact of VAT on Fuel in Northern Ireland (1993)
- How Do We Rate? (1993)
- High Street Consumer Concerns (1993)

Leaflets

- The Council Information Pack (1999)
- Student Housing Guidelines (1998)
- Fuel Safety Card (1998)
- Charter Standards Statement (1996)

Other Resources

- Walk on the Wise Side (1998)
- Consumer Choices - Home Economics Information Technology Resource (1994)



*Statement of Accounts
of the
General Consumer Council
for Northern Ireland*

YEAR ENDED 31 MARCH 1999

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Foreword

History of the Council

The General Consumer Council was established in 1985. It replaced the Northern Ireland Consumer Council, the Northern Ireland Electricity Consumers Council and the Transport Users' Committee.

In 1992 the functions previously exercised by the Council in relation to electricity matters were transferred to the Office of Electricity Regulation for Northern Ireland (Ofreg N.I.). However, the Council's role in energy matters was enhanced by taking over responsibility for representing coal consumers in 1995 and consumers of natural gas in 1996.

Statutory background

The Council was established under the General Consumer Council (NI) Order 1984. The legislation confers a statutory obligation on the Council to promote and safeguard the interests of consumers including specific responsibilities for energy, food and transport. The Gas (NI) Order 1996 gave the Council new responsibilities to represent consumers of natural gas and a duty to advise the Director General of Gas and report to him on certain matters.

Review of the activities

The Council has actively campaigned to bring about change which benefits consumers. This has included carrying out research, disseminating information, making representations on behalf of Northern Ireland's consumers and campaigning for a fair deal.

Year 2000 Issues

Included in the 1998/99 expenditure are costs incurred for replacing the non-year 2000 compliant computer support system. All other computer software packages are believed to be compliant.

Assurances of compliance have been sought and received in relation to the Council's computer hardware and certain other equipment including the fax machine and telephone system.

Prompt payment practice

The General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland is committed to the prompt payment of bills for goods and services received in accordance with the Confederation of British Industry's Prompt Payers Code and Government accounting rules. Unless otherwise stated in the contract, payment is made no later than 30 days from the presentation of a valid invoice or similar demand.

During the year 99% of bills were paid within this standard.

Future development

The Council will continue to represent the interests of consumers in Northern Ireland. Its Corporate Plan for 1998-2001 identifies five strategic areas for action in this regard.

Events since the end of the financial year

There has been no change in the financial status of the Council since 31 March 1999.

Council members

The names of persons serving during the year ended 31 March 1999 were:

Name		First appointed
Mrs Joan Whiteside	Chairman	1 January 1997
Mr David Gray	* Deputy Chairman	1 January 1994 (renewed 27 July 1996) (retired 31 March 1999)
Mrs Felicity Huston	* Deputy Chairman	13 May 1996
Mr Ciaran Brolly	Council Member	1 January 1996 (renewed 1 January 1999)
Mrs Ann Collins	Council Member	13 May 1996
Mr Daniel Corr	Council Member	1 January 1997
Mr Mark Gavin	Council Member	27 July 1996
Mrs Dawn Livingstone	Council Member	1 January 1996 (renewed 1 January 1999)
Mrs Patricia Mallon	Council Member	1 January 1997
Mr Brian Oliphant	Council Member	27 July 1993 (renewed 27 July 1996)
Mr Denis Smith	Council Member	1 January 1994 (renewed 1 April 1996)
Mrs Jacqueline Weir	Council Member	1 January 1996 (renewed 1 January 1999)
Dr Jane Wilde	Council Member	1 January 1996 (retired 31 December 1998)
Mr Bill Osborne	Council Member	8 February 1999
Mr Michael Walker	Council Member	8 February 1999
Mr Rory McShane	Council Member	27 July 1996 (resigned 29 May 1998)

* Mr David Gray resigned from his position as Deputy Chairman from 8 February 1999 and Mrs Felicity Huston was appointed Deputy Chairman from 8 February 1999.

No other persons served on the Council at any time during the year.



Joan Whiteside

Chairman

The General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland

Elizabeth House

116 Hollywood Road

Belfast

Statement of Council Members' responsibilities

Under paragraph 12(3) of Schedule 1 to the General Consumer Council (Northern Ireland) Order 1984, the Council Members are required to prepare a statement of accounts for each financial year in the form and on the basis directed by the Department of Economic Development, with the approval of the Department of Finance and Personnel. The accounts are prepared on a cash basis and must properly present the receipts and payments for the financial year and the balance at year end.

As the senior full time official of the Council, the Director carries the responsibilities of the Accounting Officer for the Council. Her relevant responsibilities as Accounting Officer, including her responsibility for the propriety and regularity of the public funds for which she is answerable and for the keeping of proper records, are set out in the Non-Departmental Public Bodies' Accounting Officer Memorandum.

By order of the board

Joan Whiteside
Chairman

Maeve Bell
Director

Statement on the system of Internal Financial Control

As Accounting Officer, I acknowledge my responsibility for ensuring that an effective system of internal financial control is maintained and operated by the General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland.

The system can provide only reasonable and not absolute assurance that assets are safeguarded, transactions authorised and properly recorded, and that material errors or irregularities are either prevented or would be detected within a timely period.

The system of internal financial control is based on a framework of regular management information, administrative procedures including segregation of duties, and a system of delegation and accountability. In particular, it includes:

- comprehensive budgeting systems with an annual budget which is reviewed and agreed by the Council;
- regular reviews by the Council of periodic and annual financial reports which indicate financial performance against the forecasts;
- setting targets to measure financial and other performance;

The Council has made arrangements for the provision of internal audit services operating to standards defined in the Government Internal Audit Manual. The work of the internal audit unit is informed by an analysis of the risk to which the council is exposed, and annual internal audit plans will be based on this analysis. The analysis of risk and the internal audit plans have been endorsed by the Council's Audit Committee and approved by me. At least annually, the Head of Internal Audit in the provider unit will provide me with a report on internal audit activity in the Council. The report will include the HIA's independent opinion on the adequacy and effectiveness of the Council's system of internal financial control.

My review of the effectiveness of the system of internal financial control is informed by the work of the internal auditors, the Audit Committee which oversees the work of the internal auditor, the appropriate staff within the Council who have responsibility for the development and maintenance of the financial control framework, and comments made by the external auditors in their management letter and other reports.

Maeve Bell
Director



Auditors' report on the statement on the system of Internal Financial Control

In addition to our audit of the financial statements, we have reviewed the Accounting Officer's statement on the system of internal financial control set out in page 32. The objective of our review is to draw attention to non-compliance with the Department of Finance and Personnel's guidance, "Corporate governance; statement on the system of internal financial control" (DAO (DFP) 2/98).

Basis of Opinion

We carried out our review in accordance with Bulletins, 1995/1 and 1996/3 "Disclosures relating to corporate governance" issued by the Auditing Practice Board insofar as they relate to statements on internal financial control.

The guidance does not require us to perform the additional work necessary to, and we do not, express any opinion on the effectiveness of the Council's system of internal financial control.

Opinion

With respect to the Accounting Officer's statement on the system of internal financial control set out in page 32, in our opinion the Accounting Officer has provided the disclosures required by the Department of Finance and Personnel's guidance: "Corporate governance; statement on the system of internal financial control" and the statement is not inconsistent with the information of which we are aware from our audit work on the financial statements.

Wilkinson Hegarty
Chartered Accountants
Registered Auditors

12 May 1999

Auditors' report to the members of The General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland

We have audited the statement of accounts on pages 35 to 40 under the General Consumer Council (Northern Ireland) Order 1984.

Respective responsibilities of the Council, the Director and auditors

As described on page 32, the Council and Director are responsible for the preparation of the statement of accounts and for ensuring the regularity of financial transactions. It is our responsibility to form an independent opinion, based on our audit, on the statement and on the regularity of the financial transactions included in it and report our opinion to you.

Basis of opinion

We conducted our audit in accordance with Auditing Standards as issued by the Auditing Practices Board. An audit includes examination, on a test basis, of evidence relevant to the amounts, disclosures and regularity of financial transactions included in the statement of accounts. It also includes an assessment of the judgements made by the Council and the Director in the preparation of the statement of accounts.

We planned and performed our audit so as to obtain all the information and explanations which we considered necessary in order to provide us with sufficient evidence to give reasonable assurance that the statement of accounts is free from material misstatement, whether caused by error or by fraud or other irregularity and that, in all material respects, the payments and receipts have been applied to the purposes intended by Parliament and conform to the authorities which govern them. In forming our opinion we also evaluated the overall adequacy of the presentation of information in the statement of accounts.

Opinion

In our opinion:

- the statement of accounts properly presents the receipts and payments of The General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland for the year ended 31 March 1999 and the balances held at that date and has been properly prepared in accordance with paragraphs 12(3) of Schedule 1 to The General Consumer Council (Northern Ireland) Order 1984.
- in all material respects the receipts and payments have been applied to the purposes intended by Parliament and conform to the authorities which govern them.

Wilkinson Hegarty
Chartered Accountants
Registered Auditors

12 May 1999

Receipts and payments account

Year ended 31 March 1999

		1999		1998	
	Note	£	£	£	£
Grants received from Department of Economic Development	2		472,000		440,000
Operating receipts	3		161		2,359
Independent project income	4		29,880		8,839
Walk on the Wise Side Receipts			14,742		-
Interest received			-		12
OFREG contributions			14,812		-
			<u>531,595</u>		<u>451,210</u>
Less:					
Corporate programme	5	84,065		91,412	
Salaries and wages	6	266,861		248,827	
Other operating payments	8	113,892		111,059	
OFREG contribution paid to DED		14,812		-	
			<u>479,630</u>		<u>451,298</u>
Surplus/ (deficit) from operations			51,965		(88)
Less:					
Other payments	9		33,551		4,922
			<u>18,414</u>		<u>(5,010)</u>
Excess/(deficit) of receipts over payments for the financial year	10		18,414		(5,010)

The notes on pages 36 to 40 form part of the statement of accounts.

Statement of balances

31 March 1999

		1999	1998
	Note	£	£
Balance at beginning of financial year		2,563	7,573
Excess/(deficit) of receipts over payments for the financial year		<u>18,414</u>	<u>(5,010)</u>
Balance at end of financial year	11	<u>20,977</u>	<u>2,563</u>

The notes on pages 36 to 40 form part of the statement of accounts.

Notes

forming part of the statement of accounts

1. Accounting policies

The statement of accounts is drawn up in a form determined by the Department of Economic Development with the consent of the Department of Finance and Personnel.

The statement of accounts is in the form of a receipts and payments account and the requirements of Financial Reporting Standard No 1 do not apply.

2. Grants received from Department of Economic Development

	1999	1998
	£	£
DED Vote 2	<u>472,000</u>	<u>440,000</u>

3. Operating receipts

Income arising from the sale of Council publications to the public and fees for media appearances and other speaking engagements:

	1999	1998
	£	£
Conference fees	30	1,560
Sale of publications	131	699
Disposal of asset	-	100
	<u>161</u>	<u>2,359</u>

4. Independent project income

	1999	1998
	£	£
House Buying Report	21,000	-
Contributions towards Student Housing Report	600	-
Contribution towards Yellow Pages/phone book	8,030	-
Post Office Users Council's event	250	-
Consumer Congress	-	1,500
Food and Safety conference	-	7,339
	<u>29,880</u>	<u>8,839</u>

5. Corporate programme

	1999	1998
	£	£
Research	45,117	55,119
Information and publicity	38,948	36,293
	<u>84,065</u>	<u>91,412</u>

6 Staff numbers and costs

(a) Council members' remuneration and allowances

	1999		1998	
	£	£	£	£
Chairman's salary - gross	12,700		12,253	
Social security costs	1,276		1,201	
Members' fees	<u>10,486</u>		<u>11,845</u>	
		24,462		25,299

(b) Staff salaries

Salaries gross	196,102		185,831	
Social security costs	14,429		13,574	
Superannuation	<u>31,868</u>		<u>24,123</u>	
		<u>242,399</u>		<u>223,528</u>
		<u>266,861</u>		<u>248,827</u>

The increase in superannuation costs includes £3,184 arrears related to the year ended 31 March 1998, due to a change in the rates applicable.

The remuneration of the director, including pension costs, was £41,053 (1998: £38,412).

No other employees received emoluments in excess of £40,000.

All of the employees (including the director) contribute to the Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme.

The average number of persons employed by the Council, excluding Council members, during the year was as follows:

	1999	1998
	Number	Number
Management	2	2
Professional staff	4	4
Administrator	1	1
Clerical and secretarial	4	4
	<u>11</u>	<u>11</u>

The number of persons employed at 31 March 1999 was 11, of which the administrator and two of the clerical staff were part-time.

7. Council members' remuneration and allowances

The Council consists of a part-time chairman, a deputy chairman and up to 16 other members. The emoluments of the chairman, who was also the highest paid Council member, were £12,761 (1998 : £12,253). The emoluments of the Council members (including the chairman) were within the following ranges:

	1999	1998
£0 - £ 5,000	13	13
£10,001 - £15,000	1	1
	<u>14</u>	<u>14</u>

In addition, Council members' expenses amounting to £8,709 (1998: £10,417) have been paid during the year and are reflected under other operating payments.

8. Other operating payments

	1999	1998
	£	£
Rent, rates and service charges	62,379	61,804
Maintenance and repairs	5,758	6,055
Insurance	2,618	2,744
Electricity	1,081	1,058
Telephone and postage	7,760	7,052
Printing and stationery	7,116	4,959
Office machinery rentals and maintenance	4,558	4,403
Staff advertising and training	5,925	4,665
Staff travel	6,050	5,068
Members' expenses	8,709	10,417
Hospitality, including catering	514	783
Audit fee	1,118	1,146
Health and Safety	191	466
Sundries	115	439
	<u>113,892</u>	<u>111,059</u>

9. Other payments

	1999	1998
	£	£
<i>Capital expenditure</i>		
Additions to office furniture and fittings	2,512	169
Additions to office equipment	31,039	4,753
	<u>33,551</u>	<u>4,922</u>

10. Excess of receipts over payments

Under section 9 of the Financial Memorandum drawn up with the Department of Economic Development, the Council is permitted to carry over from one financial year to the next up to 2% of grant-in-aid, together with any unspent receipts for application to specific purposes, with the agreement of the Department.

The excess of payments over receipts for the financial year amounting to £18,414 includes an amount of £14,712 relating to a specific information project "Walk on the Wise Side" where the amount was received before the year end for the second stage of the project which will be carried out in the next financial year

11. Balance at end of financial year

	1999	1998
	£	£
Cash at bank	<u>20,977</u>	<u>2,563</u>

12. Related party transactions

The General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland is a non-departmental public body funded by the Department of Economic Development for Northern Ireland.

The Department of Economic Development is regarded as a related party. During the year the General Consumer Council had no material transactions with the Department of Economic Development other than the receipt of grants.

During the year, none of the Council members, key management staff or other related party has undertaken any material transactions with the General Consumer Council.

The statement of accounts on pages 35 to 40 was approved by the Council on 12 May 1999 and signed on its behalf by:

By order of the Council



Joan Whiteside
Chairman



Maeve Bell
Director

REPORT OF THE COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

Respective responsibilities of the auditors and the Comptroller and Auditor General

As described in the Auditors' Report on page 34 it is the auditors' responsibility to form an independent opinion, based on their audit, on the statement of accounts and on the regularity of the financial transactions included in them and to report their opinion to the members of the General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland. It is my responsibility, under Paragraph 12(6) of Schedule 1 to the General Consumer Council (Northern Ireland) Order 1984, to examine those audited statements and to make a report to you.

Report

I have examined the audited statement of accounts on pages 35-40 of the General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland for the year ended 3 March 1999. I have no observations to make on these financial statements.

J M DOWDALL
Office Comptroller and Auditor General

21 June 1999

Northern Ireland Audit
106 University Street
BELFAST
BT7 1EU