



The Consumer Council

**Response to the Department for Regional
Development on proposals for a Roads
(Functions of District Councils) Bill**

**By the
General Consumer Council
for Northern Ireland**

July 2010

Introduction

The General Consumer Council ('Consumer Council'), the statutory representative for passengers travelling to, from or within Northern Ireland, welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation on proposals for a draft Roads (Functions of District Councils) Bill.

The Consumer Council exists to champion and safeguard the interests of consumers in the public and private sectors. Through research, policy development, education and information and campaigning the Consumer Council works to make the consumer voice heard and make it count

Delay in Local Government Reform

The Consumer Council recognises that this consultation was issued prior to the stalling of progress in the proposed reform of local government in June 2010. To ensure consumers remained informed and engaged an assessment of the impact of this delay in the reform process should be undertaken.

In light of this the Consumer Council requests confirmation of whether the proposed transfer of powers proposed within the consultation will be going ahead under the current 26 council model. There must be clear consideration of the options now open to the Department in light of this delay in the reform process and the cost effectiveness of the transfer of powers under the current model.

The remainder of this response was developed on the expectation that the reform process was to proceed and should be considered with this context.

Consumer Council Comments On The Proposals Contained Within The Consultation Document

The Consumer Council supports the aim of the Review of Public Administration to produce a more streamlined system of public administration that allows easy access to services, is easily understood, has clear lines of responsibility and accountability and produces better integrated and co-ordinated services. The Consumer Council believes that more integrated planning and delivery at local level should have a positive effect on public service provision.

The Consumer Council has previously carried out qualitative research into consumer's views about the Review of Public Administration process and public service provision¹. Participants reported having many expectations of public services. These included having a service which is efficient, cost effective, responsive, consistent and punctual along with being easy to

¹ Consumer Council Research into the Review of Public Administration, Final Report (April 2006)

contact with an adequate complaints system and friendly / caring staff. The research found that these expectations were not being fully met as participants expressed generally low levels of satisfaction with public services. For the most part, these low levels of satisfaction were as a result of inadequate complaint systems, a lack of accountability and transparency and poor levels of communication.

Participants in the research were positive regarding the increased localisation of services and are hopeful that this would lead to

- increased accountability and transparency
- more uniformity in standards and procedures
- improved service quality
- more partnership working and greater cooperation

Participants also stated that more locally developed policies and decisions could improve how services are delivered.

The Consumer Councils **supports** the proposals to enable local councils to carry out the functions listed:

- authorising local road race events;
- issuing access permits to pedestrian zones;
- off-street car parks; and
- on and off-street parking enforcement.

Whilst supporting the view that more locally developed policies and decisions can improve how services are delivered, the Consumer Council believes it is essential that decisions made by local government are not produced in isolation from those at a strategic level. Local government must be involved in the strategic and policy development to ensure that it reflects local community needs within an overarching approach. Careful coordination between the two-tiers and understanding of prospective roles and responsibilities will be vital to the successful implementation of this model.

The Consumer Councils acknowledges that the decriminalisation of parking enforcement has produced positive outcomes for everyone accessing towns and city centres, with illegal parking having decreased by approximately 65% since the commencement of decriminalised enforcement in 2006².

When implementing these proposals, it is essential that in the provision of on and off street parking and access permits to pedestrian zones that consumers desire for "*uniformity in standards and procedures*" is recognised and implemented. A coordinated approach across local government is required to ensure that consumers have are treated equitably in terms of access to parking provision regardless of where they live in Northern Ireland, particularly older people and those with a disability who receive parking concessions through the Blue Badge scheme.

² Northern Ireland Assembly – Weekly Written Answer Booklet 18/06/10, AQW 7288/10

Recognising local requirements while maintaining a high level of consistency in the provision, cost and enforcement of on-street and off-street parking and will help to avoid confusion amongst consumers when availing of facilities in different Council areas. The coordinated and uniform approach to parking enforcement across Northern Ireland has proved beneficial and ensuring a consistent approach under any new arrangements will help to maintain and build on the improvements realised to date.

Details of parking provision and enforcement, temporary road closures and procedures for applying for access permits to enter pedestrian zones must be clearly advertised and communicated to the public. It is important that consumers have access to adequate information to make fully informed choices about the options available to them in how they access services.

The importance of consultation with consumers should be recognised and carried out at all stages of the planning and implementation of the transfer of powers to local government. Appropriate consultation can aid public buy-in and confidence in the system and how powers are transferred. Innovative and imaginative methods of engagement should be found if consumers are to take part throughout the process.

The Consumer Council believes that value for money must be demonstrated in the exercise of these powers by local councils. The consultation document states that councils will be responsible for traffic attendants and the issuing and processing penalty charge notices. The Consumer Council would question the cost effectiveness of councils procuring services for parking enforcement and the processing of penalty charge notices individually. A coordinated approach across councils could provide better value for money in the procurement of these services.

The transfer of powers to local councils should be supported by a planned and sustained programme of capacity building for all involved to ensure that consumers are represented by an effective and inclusive voice in local public service provision. Councils will have the responsibility to produce Local Transport Plans under the ongoing Public Transport Reform process and the availability and enforcement of parking will play a major role in the delivery and promotion of public transport options. It is essential that local councils have the capacity to produce coordinated plans which recognise this in order to provide optimum benefit for consumers as part of this process.

The Consumer Council appreciates the opportunity to participate in this consultation. We hope that you will find our comments useful and that our views will be reflected in the final decision making process.