

TWO HUNDRED AND FIFTY SECOND MEETING OF THE GENERAL CONSUMER COUNCIL FOR NORTHERN IRELAND HELD AT ELIZABETH HOUSE, 116 HOLLYWOOD ROAD, BELFAST, BT4 1NY, ON WEDNESDAY 29 JANUARY 2014 AT 10.30 A.M.

252/1

ATTENDANCE

Mr Rick Hill Chairperson
Mr David Beattie
Mr Kit Chivers
Mrs Deirdre Fitzpatrick
Mr David Galloway
Mrs Jill Gillespie
Mrs Mandy Patrick
Mr Sam Snodden
Dr Margaret Ward
Mr Lee Wilson

IN ATTENDANCE

Ms Marian Cree Head of Energy (for part of the meeting)
Mrs Kathy Graham Interim Director of Policy
Mr Don Leeson Director of Operations
Ms Donna Magee Head of Finance and HR (for part of the meeting)
Mr Aodhan O'Donnell Interim Chief Executive
Mrs Rhonda Allen Personal Assistant

APOLOGIES

None

The Deputy Chair congratulated the Chairperson on being award the MBE in the New Year Honours.

252/2

CHAIRPERSON'S BUSINESS

252/2.1

Section of minutes redacted – it is the view of the qualified person that a section 40 exemption should be applied at this time (Personal Information).

The Chairperson advised members that the Committee had sought, and received assurance from the Interim Chief Executive (as Accounting Officer) that the remuneration of staff was in line with NICS guidelines and that all pay increases had been applied in line with the requirements of the Consumer Council's Management Statement and Financial Memorandum.

STAFF JOINED THE MEETING

252/2.2 Declaration of Conflict of Interest

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

He explained that the Chairperson would have the ability to define a conflict of interest and request members' compliance if this arose.

No members declared a conflict of interest on any agenda item.

252/2.3 The Chairperson asked members to note the letter of thanks from Sarah Havlin.

252/2.4 Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) Review of the Consumer Council

The Chairperson confirmed, as agreed at the last meeting, that he and Kit Chivers had signed off the final draft of the Consumer Council's (CCNI) response to the DETI consultation. He thanked members and staff for the work that had gone into providing such a strong, confident document.

It was reported that almost 300 consultation responses had been submitted. CCNI had pressed DETI to publish all of the responses as soon as possible which would have allowed CCNI to analyse the responses. DETI had confirmed that the responses would not be published until their analysis had been submitted to the Minister.

Section of minutes redacted – it is the view of the qualified person that a Section 35 exemption should be applied at this time (formulation of government policy).

252/2.5 The Chairperson updated members on his recent meeting with DETI's Permanent Secretary. They had discussed the next steps in the review process and timescales.

252/2.6 Members noted that the Chairperson and Interim Chief Executive had been invited to give evidence at the Enterprise, Trade and Investment (ETI) Committee on 30 January 2014 on the role of CCNI. The Interim Chief Executive confirmed that a copy of CCNI's response to DETI's consultation had been sent to the ETI Committee as had the forward work programme consultation.

252/2.7 It was agreed that if necessary a Council meeting would be called before the next scheduled meeting on 19 March 2014.

252/2.8 Any Other Chair's Business

There was no further Chair's business.

252/3 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the two hundred and fiftieth and two hundred and fifty first meetings which had been circulated were agreed and signed.

252/4 MATTERS ARISING

252/4.1 Consumer Support Internal Audit Report

The audit of Consumer Support's procedures, including its arrangements for assessing customer satisfaction, had been completed and awarded a substantial assurance rating. Members noted that the system in place for assessing customer satisfaction was robust.

Members were also advised that the recent internal audit on risk management and corporate governance had received a satisfactory assurance.

252/4.2 Complaints Report

Following a request from members that year to date figures be included in the complaints report the Director of Operations explained that Table 1 of the report included figures for Quarter 3 and the year to date. The figures in the remaining tables were for Quarter 3 only because of a constraint in the reporting function of the case management system, which was unable to produce both in a single report. To achieve year to date figures in the whole report would require the manual entry of around 500 figures, which would not be a good use of staff time and had the potential for human error.

252/4.3 Business Proficiency and Energy Efficiency Report

Members had received copies of both reports.

Members noted that the reports were being considered by the ETI Committee on 30 January 2014.

The matters arising were noted.

252/5 FINANCE AND GOVERNANCE

252/5.1 Draft Risk Register Quarter Three 2013 – 2014

Members noted that the Register was in a slightly different format from previous quarters, reflecting changes in DETI guidance.

One change in risk assessments was proposed relating to the risk regarding financial management. Procurement delays within CPD had left a tight timescale for the delivery of two high value projects, combined research and website development, and therefore the risk likelihood in this area had been increased to 'medium'.

The Risk Register had been considered and endorsed by the Audit Committee immediately before the Council meeting. The Committee had requested that the Reputation and Credibility risk appetite be raised to cautious. Members agreed this change.

It was agreed to continue circulating the matrix explaining the definitions of risk categories with the risk register.

Members requested further changes to the Register:

Page 5 – “Ineffective use of overspend/underspend and/or qualification” – move last action to become first action. It was agreed to reword this risk to record evidence that the issue was being taken seriously and specific examples of the delays being experienced were to be included.

Members asked the Audit Committee to consider splitting the above risk between internal and external factors.

Consideration was also to be given to aligning the above risk with “External influences deliver against Corporate Plan 2011-15 objectives” risk.

Members approved the Risk Register.

252/5.2 Quarter 3 Management Accounts 2013 – 2014

The Head of Finance and HR reported that the financial position as at 31 December 2013 showed a projected underspend of approximately £15k. However the outcome of the procurement for combined research since the end of the Quarter had increased the underspend to around £30k.

Members noted that the total income for 2013/14 had been reduced by £43k. £30k had been returned to DETI via the January monitoring round and £13k water funding had been returned due to the postponement of the Long Term Water Strategy by DRD until 2014/15.

Members discussed the areas of underspend due to delays in progressing work through CPD. As the CPD service to CCNI was provided through a service level agreement with DETI it was agreed that the Interim Chief Executive should write to the Permanent Secretary setting out the issues, delays being experienced and the risk to CCNI in terms of work programme not being completed as planned and budget being underspent.

Members approved the quarter 3 management accounts.

252/6 **CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S BUSINESS**

252/6.1 Performance Against Objectives Quarter Three 2013 - 2014

It was reported that with the exception of one measure in respect of Regulation Working for Consumers, which would not be completed until 2014–15, good progress was being made on all other measures, although some with slight slippages in timeframes and/or budget.

Members noted the report.

252/6.2 Revised Draft Business Plan 2014 - 15

The revised draft had approximately 50 measures but further work was being undertaken to refine these and this may result in a reduction. Many of the measures featured in the draft Forward Work Programme which was currently being consulted on and these responses would also have to be taken into account if appropriate. Consideration would also have to be given to any comments received from DETI.

Members discussed a number of the objectives and measures including fuel poverty, social media, outreach, energy brokering, transport and the rationale for not measuring redress in terms of monetary value. They also discussed the DETI led work on renewable energy and CCNI's contribution.

Members requested the following changes:

Objective 15 – Add an activity and measure relating specifically to vulnerable people and in particular disabled people.

Objective 15 – Bullet point 2 – add in ticketing changes.

Objective 10 – consider increasing target for increase in numbers of followers on social media.

Members approved the draft business plan with the above changes.

A near final draft of the Business Plan would be brought to the March 2014 Council meeting for approval.

252/6.3 Transfer of Postal Services from Consumer Futures Post (NI) (CFP) to Consumer Council (CCNI)

Members were advised that Parliament had agreed a fast-track approach (40 days of scrutiny) for the legislation that abolishes Consumer Futures and transferred its functions to Citizens Advice and Citizens Advice Scotland and postal services to CCNI. The Scottish Parliament had given its approval for the legislation and the ETI Committee was due to review it on 30 January 2014 ahead of an Assembly motion to approve the legislation. All of this should mean that the transfer would proceed as planned on 1 April 2014.

It was noted that postal services had been included in the draft Forward Work Programme currently out for consultation with stakeholders. It was also noted that discussions on joint working arrangements post-transfer were ongoing and plans to integrate staff were progressing.

252/6.4 HR Reports

252/6.4.1 Employee Engagement Index - Quarterly Staff Survey

The inaugural mini quarterly survey results showed a marked improvement compared to comparable questions in the Staff Survey one year ago.

There was one cause for concern relating to horizontal communications. This matter was being discussed with staff in team meetings.

Members asked that consideration be given to adding a question to the quarterly survey - “would you recommend CCNI as an organisation to work for”.

Members acknowledged the quality of leadership and cohesion of staff which had been reflected in the survey results and in particular members noted that even at a time of uncertainty less staff were looking to leave CCNI than previously.

252/6.4.2 HR measures as at end of Third Quarter

Nothing of significance to note, other than a seasonal increase in sick absence, exacerbated by the long term absence of one person who was now back at work.

Members noted the HR Reports.

252/6.5 Strategic Updates

The Interim Chief Executive provided members with updates on:

- Feedback from consultation process. Work had already begun responding to feedback from key stakeholders.
- Comms and outreach – 55 events over the last quarter.
- CCNI supercomplaint status confirmed by Financial Conduct Authority. A number of areas being considered to take forward. Any decision would be discussed with Board in advance of proceeding.
- Meetings held including UUP Councillors Association and forthcoming attendance at ETI Committee.
- Round up of attendance at political conferences.

Members noted the strategic updates.

252/7 **POLICY/STRATEGY**

252/7.1 Complaints Report Quarter Three 2013 – 2014

Members noted the complaints report.

252/7.2 Policy Position Record, 1 April 2013 – 31 December 2013

The report provided an overview of all policy decisions agreed by Council and/or the Chief Executive year to date.

The report was noted.

252/7.3 Consumer Tracker Questions

The Interim Director of Policy advised members that this snap shot, taken in late November/early December 2013 gave an indication on how consumers were coping in the current financial climate. Members were also advised that it was planned to run a full survey on a biannual basis. Members agreed that this type of information was critical for future work.

It was agreed that the findings of next full survey would come to Council. The findings would also be used during the next corporate planning process.

252/7.4 Regulatory Models for Consumer Bodies

The Head of Energy explained that as part of CCNI's project 'Regulation Working Better for Consumers' a report had been commissioned by CCNI and had been written by David Stubbs, an expert in consumer policy and utility regulation. The report circulated outlined the analysis, findings and conclusions.

One of the key findings was that the current arrangements in Northern Ireland were consistent with best practice compared to other regulatory models and were conferring significant economic benefits for Northern Ireland consumers. In general consumers were best served by an independent consumer body, whose only remit was to pursue consumer interest rather than to find a broader public interest.

The research was being used to inform the wider work of the joint project involving the CCNI water and energy teams. The internal work included an analysis of the existing approach that the NI Authority for Utility Regulation (NIAUR) adopts in relation to consumer representation in the regulation of the water and energy sectors. It would also identify any differences in the approaches used by the NIAUR in the energy and water Directorates identifying strengths and weaknesses of each approach used. Finally it would benchmark the NIAUR consumer representation process against the findings in the Stubbs report.

It was noted that a summary report was being produced which would outline the action points and recommendations from both the internal and external research and would be brought to Council for consideration.

Members noted the report.

252/8 COMMITTEE BUSINESS

252/8.1 Audit Committee

The Minutes of the sixty eighth meeting which had been circulated were agreed by the members who had been present at the meeting. Council noted the Minutes.

252/9 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

252/9.1 Section of minutes redacted – it is the view of the qualified person that a section 43 exemption should be applied at this time (Commercial Interests).

252/9.2 Review of the Meeting

Members confirmed they were content with the conduct of the meeting and the content and quality of the papers provided.

252/10 **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting would be held on Wednesday 19 March 2014 at 10.30 a.m. unless one was required sooner.

There was no further business and the meeting closed at 1.05 p.m.

Signed _____

Date _____