

**TWO HUNDRED AND SEVENTIETH MEETING OF THE GENERAL CONSUMER
COUNCIL FOR NORTHERN IRELAND HELD AT OFCOM, 2ND FLOOR, LANDMARK
HOUSE, CROMAC QUAY, THE GAS WORKS, ORMEAU ROAD, BELFAST, BT7 2JD
ON TUESDAY 3 MAY 2016 AT 10.00 AM**

270/1

ATTENDANCE

Ms Sheila McClelland	Chair
Mr David Beattie	
Ms Noyona Chundur	
Ms Lynne Crowther	
Dr Sinéad Furey	
Mr David Galloway	
Dr Joan Martin	
Mr Sam Snodden	
Ms Mary Woods	

IN ATTENDANCE

Mr John French	Chief Executive (Except agenda item 270/10.1)
Mrs Kathy Graham	Interim Director of Policy (Except agenda items 270/1-270/7.2, 270/10.1)
Mr Scott Kennerley	Head of Transport (agenda item 270/8.2, 8.3, 8.4)
Mr Don Leeson	Director of Operations (Except agenda items 270/7.2-270/12)
Mr Graham Smith	Interim Head of Water (agenda item 270/8.1)
Mrs Rhonda Allen	Personal Assistant (Except agenda items 270/7.2, 270/10.1)

APOLOGIES

None

BY INVITATION

Jonathan Rose	NI Director, OFCOM
Maureen Edmonson	Chair, OFCOM Advisory Committee for NI
James Stinson	Regulatory Affairs Manager, OFCOM

270/2 **DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

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

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

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

270/3 **MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

The minutes of the two hundred and sixty-ninth meeting which had been circulated were proposed by Lynne Crowther and seconded by Joan Martin. The minutes were agreed and signed.

270/4 **MATTERS ARISING**

Members were updated on the status of the Newsletter which was being issued after the NI Assembly elections.

The Matters Arising were noted.

270/5 **CHAIRPERSON'S BUSINESS**

270/5.1 **Draft Corporate Plan and Forward Work Programme Consultation Responses – March 2016**

The Chief Executive reported that the consultation on both the plan and programme had been successful with a healthy response rate and a well attended consultation event.

Members noted the specific comments made and how these had been addressed. They also noted that the documents would now be sent to the Department for the Economy for final approval. Once approved both documents would be published on the Consumer Council's website.

The Draft Corporate Plan and Forward Work Programme were approved.

270/5.2 Deputy Chair Recruitment

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

270/5.3 Annual Performance Assessments

Members had been issued with details of the annual performance assessment process and Departmental guidance. Meetings would be set up for those members being assessed.

270/5.4 Policy Groups

The Chief Executive explained that as part of its statutory duties the Consumer Council had to establish groups in connection with the exercise of its functions in transport, food, energy, water and sewerage. To comply with this legislative requirement it was proposed to form a Board Consumer Policy Group comprising of all Board Members.

It was noted that the Group was not a decision making body and that policy decisions would come to Board for approval.

Board members approved the establishment of a monthly, excluding July and August, Consumer Policy Group. It was agreed to review the progress and effectiveness of the Group after one year.

It was agreed to consider co-ordinating meetings with Board meeting dates and that most convenient times to meet would be either 4.30-6.30pm or 5-7pm.

270/5.5 Any Other Chair's Business

The Chair outlined forthcoming meetings and advised that Translink's Chief Executive, would be presenting at the June 2016 Board meeting.

Members were also advised that there could be future opportunities to work with Translink by bidding for specific projects eg monitoring of customer satisfaction.

270/6 FINANCE AND GOVERNANCE

270/6.1 Annual Report and Accounts for 2015–16

270/6.1.1 Members noted the full Annual Report and Accounts for 2015–16, including the financial statements, would be presented to the next Board meeting following audit of same.

270/6.1.2 Performance Report

The Director of Operations reported that the majority of the outputs the Council planned to deliver in 2015-16 had been achieved. Given the need to hold back expenditure in the first half of the year pending the Voluntary Exit Scheme, and the subsequent loss of staff through this, a number of the outputs were delivered later than anticipated. Of these, seven would not be fully completed until 2016-17. Only three planned outputs had not been delivered.

It was agreed that an online resource should be developed to highlight the impact of the Council's work in other areas. This would be outside the formal reporting structure. Members agreed that sustainability should be considered in a wider context eg social.

Members approved the draft report for inclusion in the Annual Report and Accounts for 2015-16.

270/6.1.3 Corporate Governance Report

It was agreed to conduct the Board and Audit and Risk Assurance Committee annual self assessments of effectiveness in the autumn.

It was also agreed, following recommendation from the NI Audit Office, to publish members' and the Executive Team's register of financial interests in the Annual Report and online.

The Corporate Governance Report was approved.

270/6.1.4 Provisional Budget Outturn

The Director informed members that there was an £11k under spend for the year ended 31 March 2016. This was within the 98% Departmental tolerance at 99%.

270/6.2 Updated Budget for 2016–17

The budget had been set on the basis of the Council's anticipated income of which, to date, 83% had been confirmed. The outcomes of business cases for the funding of planned work on energy and transport issues were awaited but it was anticipated that these would be approved in the near future.

A revised budget would be presented to the June 2016 Board meeting which would confirm the total income for 2016-17, take account of the impact of the Voluntary Exit Scheme and any changes to planned programme expenditure following the completion of detailed project planning.

It was noted that bids for additional funding had been made as part of the June 2016 Monitoring. These were to seek to recoup the costs of Board member development activities and to the Department of Finance and Personnel's (DFP) Change Fund for the costs of migrating to HR Connect. However, the outcome of these may not be known until after the June 2016 Board meeting.

Members asked that audit fees be moved from work programme to legal.

Members noted the budget update.

270/6.3 Audit and Risk Assurance Committee – Annual Report

Members had received the Committee's Annual Report together with reports of the internal audits carried out.

The Chair of the Committee reported that he and the Committee felt the Council was a well run organisation with good governance procedures in place. He stated that while staff changes had undoubtedly had an impact the Committee did not see this as a major issue. He also stated that as and when audit and reporting standards change the focus of the Committee and areas being audited would also change.

Members discussed the risks associated with outsourcing services to HR Connect. It was noted that one of the reasons for outsourcing this function was to reduce risk.

Members approved the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee Annual Report.

270/6.4 Internal Audit Plan for 2016–17

The Internal Audit Plan had been reviewed by the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee. The Chair of the Committee reported that the plan was the third year of a three year plan and the work being planned was comprehensive with a robust schedule. It was noted that business need should be taken account of when planning future audits.

In response to earlier discussions on risks of outsourcing services members noted that reviews would be undertaken of any audits conducted on service level agreement partners.

The Internal Audit Plan was approved.

270/6.5 Corporate Risk Register for 2016–17

The Audit and Risk Assurance Committee had reviewed the register in terms of the management system in place being appropriate and that the risks identified were being properly addressed.

The Corporate Risk Register for 2016-17 was approved.

270/6.6 Business Cases' Outcome

The business cases for funding for postal services and water had been approved in full. Formal approval of the energy and transport business cases were awaited although the energy business case had been approved informally.

270/7 CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S BUSINESS

270/7.1 HR Connect Business Case

The Council's 2016-17 forward work programme contained an objective to move to HR Connect in preparation of the planned new NI Civil Service HR Centre of Excellence commencing in April 2017. In line with this objective, HR Connect would take over the Council's HR and payroll administration. HR Connect would also support the Council in respect of employment law advice, legal representation, and grievance and disciplinary investigations, as required at no additional cost. The Council, as a separate employer, would retain its decision-making role and legal responsibilities in all these areas.

It was noted that subscription to HR Connect was a necessary condition for participation in the HR Centre of Excellence. The Council was scheduled to be included in first tranche of organisations to participate in the Centre of Excellence.

The Director of Operations reported that the financial implications for 2016-17 was £39k and budget cover was in place to cover this. It was estimated that migration to HR Connect would save the Council circa £150k over five years.

Members discussed staff savings and redistribution of staff resources; consultation with the union; privatisation of public services; need for staff training on new systems; recruitment processes; and sliding scale costs.

Members approved the migration to HR Connect.

270/7.2 Voluntary Exit Scheme and Next Steps

The Chief Executive updated Board Members on the Council's Voluntary Exit Scheme. Nicola Powderley, Evolution HR, advised Board Members on the proposed new structure for the Consumer Council.

Members agreed the proposals.

270/7.3 Chief Executive's Report

270/7.3.1 The Chief Executive advised that the energy comparison website would be operational within the next few weeks.

270/7.3.2 Post Office closures were discussed including future closures; obtaining closure criteria; impact assessments; Memorandum of Understanding with Citizens Advice in G.B.; monitoring the outcome of the Council's consultation response.

The Chief Executive's Report was noted.

270/7.4 Management Dashboard – March 2016

Members noted there was no financial information in the March Dashboard as it was the financial year end.

The Management Dashboard was noted.

270/8 POLICY/STRATEGY

270/8.1 Water and Sewerage Services Bill Update

The Interim Head of Water advised that the new legislation commenced on 23 March 2016. He gave members an overview of the provision of the new legislation.

Members noted the update.

270/8.2 Taxis Briefing

The Head of Transport outlined the recent changes to the taxi legislation and outlined the Council's role.

Members discussed the issue of rural access and dead miles as well as taxi complaints.

Members noted the briefing.

270/8.3 Ferry Site Visit Report

The report summarised the findings from visits undertaken in January 2016 at both Larne and Belfast passenger ferry terminals with participants who had a range of disabilities and mobility needs. The purpose of the visits was to examine the special assistance provided, to help participants gain a better understanding of the support available and to provide the ferry companies, port operators and the Council with an insight into the of issues faced by passengers using the service. The report was being shared with all relevant stakeholders to enable continuous improvement.

The Council would continue to work with and support the companies to review and progress the comments made to ensure that the services provided to sea passengers with a disability and reduced mobility continue to meet passengers' specific needs.

It was agreed to highlight the ferry site visit report in the Newsletter.

Members noted the report and commented that the level of detail would enable real change to be effected.

270/8.4 Consumer Support Contacts and Complaints Report Quarter Four 2015 – 2016

Members raised concerns about the falling number of complaints. The Chief Executive advised that more face to face contact with consumers was being planned and other methods of raising awareness were being explored. It was noted that Consumerline, Trading Standards Service (TSS), telephone helpline and website was

also experiencing a fall in contacts. The Council would be meeting DfE and TSS to discuss further.

Members noted the report

270/8.5 Policy Briefing Paper

Members were advised that the policy manuals would be continually updated as and when new policies were agreed.

Members noted the Policy Briefing Paper.

270/8.6 HM Treasury (HMT) Illegal Lending Proposal

The Director of Policy reported that HM Treasury wished to establish new arrangements in Northern Ireland to protect consumers against illegal money lenders. To date HMT had found it difficult to secure agreement from a NI department to lead on this work, and it had been suggested to HMT that the Consumer Council may be best placed to coordinate a campaign.

If the work proceeded a scoping exercise with HMT and NI stakeholders would commence ensuring the project was true to the Council's Corporate Plan, could be delivered for the funding offered and complimented existing priorities.

Members approved further exploration with HMT and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) with a view to become the provider organisation.

270/9 COMMITTEE BUSINESS / MINUTES OF MEETINGS

270/9.1 Members noted the minutes of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee meetings held on 21 October 2015 and 14 March 2016.

270/10 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

270/10.1 Review of the Meeting

Members reflected that the organisation had experienced rapid change over the last few years and this was obviously going to continue with the proposed restructure. They were cognisant of their roles in the Board but were also mindful of their duty of care to staff.

The Chair reminded members that the Chief Executive was appointed as Accounting Officer and it lay within his responsibility to ensure that the organisation was configured to deliver on the Corporate Plan. The Board was required to be satisfied of the capacity but to ensure that the Chief Executive with his HR support should be empowered in his leadership role to deliver on the restructuring. The Chair agreed that the Chief Executive would ensure that the Board would be kept informed of progress.

270/11 **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

- 270/11.1 The next meeting would be held on Tuesday 21 June 2016 at 10 a.m.
- 270/11.2 The Chair also advised members of upcoming dates for meetings, training and external stakeholder visits.
- 270/11.3 Members noted the August 2016 Council meeting date had been changed from 9 August to 23 August.

270/12 **PRESENTATION FROM OFCOM**

There was no further business and the meeting closed at 2 p.m.

Signed _____

Date _____