



**The Consumer Council**

**Combined Energy, Water and Transport  
Forward Work Programme  
1 April 2012 to 31 March 2013**

**January 2012**

<b>Contents</b>	<b>Page</b>
1. Who we are and what we do	3
2. Introduction	3
3. Our Approach	4
4. The Context of the 2012/13 Forward Work Programme	5
5. Key Achievements from the 2011/12 Forward Work Programme	9
6. Expenditure on Energy, Water and Transport	12
7. Combined Forward Work Programme for Energy, Water and Transport – 1 April 2012 to 31 March 2013	13
Annex 1 Statutory Duties in Energy, Water and Transport	19

## 1. Who we are and what we do

**The Consumer Council** is an independent consumer organisation, working to bring about change to benefit Northern Ireland (NI) consumers. Our aim is to make the consumer voice heard and make it count.

We have a statutory remit to *promote and safeguard the interests* of consumers in NI and we have specific functions in relation to energy, water, transport and food<sup>1</sup>. These include considering consumer complaints and enquiries, carrying out research and educating and informing consumers<sup>2</sup>.

The Consumer Council is also a designated body for the purposes of supercomplaints<sup>3</sup>, which means that we can refer any consumer affairs goods and services issue to the Office of Fair Trading<sup>4</sup>, where we feel that the market may be harming consumers' best interests.

In taking forward our broad statutory remit we are informed by and representative of consumers in NI. We work to bring about change to benefit consumers by making their voice heard and making it count. To represent consumers in the best way we can, we listen to them and produce robust evidence to put their priorities at the heart of all we do.

## 2. Introduction

The Consumer Council has a statutory duty to develop and consult on a Forward Work Programme for Water, Energy and Transport under the Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006, the Energy Order 2003 and the Transport Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 respectively.

The Consumer Council's legal powers include:

- Representing the views of consumers on consumer matters
- Making proposals or providing advice and information about consumer matters
- Obtaining and keeping under review information about consumer issues and the views of consumers on these matters

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<sup>1</sup> The Consumer Council undertakes its specific functions in relation to food recognising the role of the Food Standards Agency (FSA). The FSA has responsibility for the development of food policy and for the provision of advice, information and assistance, in respect to food safety or other interests of consumers in relation to food. Therefore, to ensure good value and use of public money, the Consumer Council and FSA have a memorandum of understanding and the Council's strategic focus on food is primarily in relation to food prices and customer experience.

<sup>2</sup> The General Consumer Council (Northern Ireland) Order 1984, 1984 No. 1822 (N.I. 12), <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1984/1822/contents>

<sup>3</sup> The Enterprise Act 2002 (Part 9 Restrictions on Disclosure of Information) (Amendment and Specification) <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukksi/2003/1400/schedules/made>

<sup>4</sup> The OFT is the UK's consumer and competition authority. Its mission is to make markets work well for consumers. It is a non-ministerial government department established by statute in 1973 <http://oft.gov.uk/about-the-oft/>

- Achieving redress for consumers by investigating complaints to secure the best possible outcome.
- Publishing information in the consumer interest
- Ensuring compliance with equality legislation and have regard to Government anti-poverty initiatives so that vulnerable consumers are placed at the centre of our work.

The Consumer Council is pleased to present our integrated Forward Work Programme for the three work areas of Water, Energy and Transport for 1 April 2012 to 31 March 2013 and welcome all comments in relation to it.

### 3. Our Approach

In order to ensure that our work programme is meaningful, forward looking and relevant, it has been developed in line with our Corporate Plan for 2011 to 2015. Our Corporate Plan was developed following extensive consumer research and widespread consumer engagement. We have consulted with Consumer Council partners and stakeholders across government and the public, private, voluntary and community sectors.

This combined Energy, Water and Transport Forward Work Programme reflects the Consumer Council's mission statement "*Making the Consumer Voice Heard and Making it Count*"; values "Integrity, Responsibility, Courage and Innovation"; and the core aims (2011/15) of:

1. Ensuring public policy reflects the needs of today's and tomorrow's consumer;
2. Championing and protecting the interests of consumers;
3. Informing and empowering consumers; and
4. Ensuring the Consumer Council is fit for purpose and delivers value for money.

The principles which guide our work are:

- Working in partnership;
- Embracing diversity;
- Reducing inequalities; and
- Promoting sustainability.

#### **4. The Context of the 2012/13 Forward Work Programme**

This Forward Work Programme covers the second year of the Consumer Council's Corporate Plan for 2011/15 and has been developed from our ongoing engagement with consumers through activities such as workshops, focus groups, research and complaints. This evidence tells us that we should continue with our advocacy role for consumers, challenge against unfair pricing and practices, pursue high standards of public service, work in partnership to educate consumers and drive for transparency within the marketplace.

The current economic challenges facing consumers are well known, as is consumers' uncertainty and declining confidence. Many consumers are experiencing financial difficulties and face significant challenges that will require long term solutions.

Consumer confidence has a huge effect on the economy, with consumer spending accounting for over 60 per cent of UK GDP<sup>5</sup>. Consumer sensitivity to price and quality promotes efficiency, lowers prices and moderates the behaviour of firms.

Empowered and informed consumers are therefore central to the economic recovery of Northern Ireland. Co-ordinated action is essential to support effective change to empower consumers, improve confidence and make a real difference to the cost of living. The Consumer Council will continue to identify and articulate the issues consumers face, and to work effectively with other organisations and sectors to ensure these issues are addressed.

#### **Energy**

Energy is at the heart of modern life in Northern Ireland. It powers our industry, and lights and heats our homes.

Northern Ireland households have the highest energy bills in the UK and recent statistics show the highest average energy bill in Great Britain is around £1,000 cheaper than the average combined oil and electricity bill in Northern Ireland<sup>6</sup>. The Consumer Council has developed an updated series of practical guides for consumers and a web-based price and service comparison tool to help them get the best possible deal for their energy needs.

Around 302,000 households<sup>7</sup> in Northern Ireland are struggling to heat their homes to an adequate level<sup>8</sup>. Fuel poverty levels in Northern Ireland are significantly higher than in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland. One of the

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<sup>5</sup> 'Through Consumers Eyes', Consumer Focus Report, December 2011

<sup>6</sup> Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) 2011 report showed that the highest energy bill in Great Britain was in Cardiff where the average dual fuel bill was £1100pa. This compares to the majority of households in Northern Ireland having an average energy bill as at 16 December 2011 of £2310. The majority of households in Northern Ireland (67 per cent of households here (82 per cent in rural areas) use oil to heat their homes, whereas 87 per cent of GB households use gas.

<sup>7</sup> Housing Conditions Survey 2009, Northern Ireland Housing Executive 2010.

<sup>8</sup> The World Health Organisation defines a satisfactory heating regime as 21°C in the living room and 18°C in other areas.

UK Government's accepted indicators of fuel poverty is the number of people who die in winter from cold related diseases such as heart attacks, strokes and respiratory diseases. Last winter there were 740<sup>9</sup> excess winter deaths in Northern Ireland, this compares to a level of 589 excess winter deaths in 2000/01. To help address fuel poverty the Consumer Council and National Energy Action jointly chair the Northern Ireland Fuel Poverty Coalition which comprises over 150 organisations, MLAs and members of the public from across Northern Ireland. The coalition focus is identifying and highlighting the urgent practical action needed to eradicate fuel poverty in Northern Ireland.

The cost of energy, the reliability of supply, and sustainability of its generation and use are all critical energy policy issues in Northern Ireland. The Consumer Council has formed an energy advisory group, chaired by Lord Whitty<sup>10</sup> and comprises senior individuals across Northern Ireland's energy sector to consider solutions to key the energy problems facing Northern Ireland's consumers today and in the future. Lord Whitty's independent report will be released in early 2012, will provide policy recommendations on how energy policy in Northern Ireland could be developed to better serve consumers here.

As a statutory partner on electricity and gas issues, we have continued to represent the consumer through price and tariff controls. Through this role we have continued to question whether the current regulatory framework is working in the best interests of consumers in Northern Ireland. The Consumer Council have recently produced a report<sup>11</sup> on this issue which provided an examination of the electricity market and suggested ways in which this could be improved to support consumers here.

With around 70 per cent of homes in Northern Ireland using heating oil as their main heating source, the Consumer Council continues to work to provide greater price transparency and consumer protection. We will continue to explore regulation and seek to persuade the Northern Ireland Heating Oil Industry to develop Codes of Practice and an agreed complaints handling process similar to what we have developed on a voluntary basis with the LPG (liquid petroleum gas) industry in Northern Ireland.

## **Water**

Significant improvements have been made to our water and sewerage services through increased and improved investment and an increased focus on consumers. We will continue to work with all to increase consumer satisfaction and confidence in the services provided by NI Water.

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<sup>9</sup>Statistical Bulletin: Excess Winter Mortality in Northern Ireland 2010/11 – Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 29 November 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Lord Whitty is a Labour Peer and has held roles as Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) and at the Department of Environment Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) with responsibility for Farming, Food and Sustainable Energy.

<sup>11</sup> Consumer Council Analysis of the McEldoon Report 'Orphans in the Energy Storm', January 2012

2012/13 will be an important year as we continue to work to improve how our water and sewerage services are delivered.

The NI Executive has committed to no domestic water charges before 2015. This provides the opportunity to look at the long-term future of this vital public health service. A longer strategic view is needed that looks at issues such as:

- Affordable water and sewerage services
- Security of supply
- Drinking water quality, supply and demand
- Sustainable wastewater collection and treatment
- Protecting and improving the water environment
- Flood risk and flood risk management
- Proposed development of a regional strategy for water
- Long-term arrangements for water funding, regulation and governance.

Strong, independent consumer representation is particularly necessary in complex regulated industries. During 2012/13 three water Price Controls will be progressing:

- PC10 – 2012/13 is the third and final year of PC10. NI Water's top five customer improvements were agreed with the Consumer Council. We will monitor the delivery of these.
- PC13 – covering 2013 – 2015 with investment of some £720m. We will work with stakeholders to agree outputs and review NI Water's business plan.
- PC15 – work will begin on the first five year Price Control.

It is important that the views of water consumers, be they domestic or non-domestic, are heard. We will work with all to ensure the consumer is best protected and represented as we progress through the Price Controls alongside our daily work with NI Water to improve water and sewerage services.

## **Transport**

The revised Regional Development Strategy aims to 'refocus and rebalance our transport priorities and present a fresh direction for transportation with sustainability at its core.'

The Consumer Council supports this aim as well as the overarching objective to 'deliver transport arrangements which promote equitable access and meet wider economic and social needs.'

The Transport Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 has the potential to change the way public transport services are delivered. The establishment of a new Public Transport Organisation and planning at a local level can improve the way transportation needs are identified and provided.

It is important that any new Public Transport Organisation develops a high level, joined up approach to the provision of transport that links in with planning, education, health and other sectors to ensure that consumers have the option to use more sustainable forms of transport to undertake essential journeys and make the most efficient use of resources.

The Consumer Council will continue to be a key stakeholder in the reform of public transport and will seek a transportation system that has the needs of passengers at its core.

Aviation is key to the recovery and development of Northern Ireland's economy. As an island region Northern Ireland consumers are more dependent on our air links than the rest of the UK. A draft of the UK Aviation Framework will be published in 2012 and the Consumer Council will continue to call for the unique needs of Northern Ireland passengers to be reflected in the final framework before its formal adoption in 2013.

European legislation on the rights of sea passengers will come into force in December 2012. This European regulation will give sea passengers improved rights in relation to assistance for passengers with reduced mobility and assistance for passengers when services are delayed or cancelled.

The Consumer Council will work to raise consumers' awareness of these rights and will continue to promote the needs of all passengers travelling to, from or within Northern Ireland.

## 5. Key Achievements from the 2011/12 Forward Work Programme

### Complaints and Enquiries

Nature of Complaint	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
Air	131	2	9	40	182
Bus	61	2	18	7	88
Ferry	4	0	1	2	7
Rail	13	1	12	3	29
Water and Sewerage	163	7	23	46	239
Electricity	663	24	43	39	769
Gas	126	4	12	8	150
Other Energy	13	0	0	0	13
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>1174</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>1477</b>

The table above shows the number of contacts and complaints dealt with by the Consumer Council for the **period 1 April 2011 to 1 December 2011**.

As a direct result of our complaint work from 1 April to 1 December 2011 **£181,436.62** has been returned to energy, transport and water consumers.

Financial recompense is only one aspect of the outcomes and benefits secured for consumers. The complaint handling process also delivered apologies, explanations, remedial work, and policy, procedural or operational changes.

### Energy

- As joint chair of the Northern Ireland Fuel Poverty Coalition (FPC), the Consumer Council has worked to make fuel poverty a priority issue within this new election term. This work has been successful in ensuring that fuel poverty is the main issue for the Social Development Committee and the Programme for Government contains a commitment to support fuel poor households.
- **Regulation** The Consumer Council has worked with electricity and gas companies and the Utility Regulator to ensure that domestic competition has been successfully extended to gas and electricity consumers using pre-payment meters, so that they can avail of the best deals and prices.
- **EU Third Energy Package** - The Consumer Council has worked with the Utility Regulator and other stakeholders to ensure that the consumer protection measures within the EU 3<sup>rd</sup> Energy Package are maximised to support Northern Ireland consumers.
- **Consumer Education** - The Consumer Council has developed Northern Ireland's only web-based price and service comparison tools for electricity and gas. An updated series of thirteen practical consumer guides have been

produced so that consumers can easily identify the best deal for their energy needs.

## Water

- **Price Controls** - Worked with stakeholders to agree a revised PC10 investment programme for NI Water that directly affects the services consumers receive. We also agreed the approach to PC13 so that consumers' priorities will remain central to the future delivery plans of NI Water.
- **Winter preparedness and consumer priorities in emergency situations** – We engaged with NI Water and others to make sure consumer needs and priorities were at the fore when developing improved co-ordinated response and information in crisis situations.
- **Service levels** - Agreed five new NI Water Codes of Practice and a Domestic Customer Charter that more clearly explained improved services from NI Water.
- Supported NI Water to improve the services received by consumer registered on its Customer Care Register for vulnerable consumers and increasing membership from 1,200 in April 2011 to over 1,800 in November 2011.
- **Solutions** – Achieved lasting solution for residents of Rosslea and surrounding townlands for the constancy of supply and low pressure problems dating back 15 years. Agreed how consumers affected by a NI Water billing error would be treated so that full refunds have been provided and any backdated charges would only be charged at 50 per cent.

## Transport

- **Air Passenger Duty (APD)** – The Consumer Council called for APD to be reduced or removed in line with the Republic of Ireland equivalent Air Travel Tax. This call was echoed by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. In September 2011 it was announced that APD for long haul flights departing Northern Ireland would be reduced from £60 to £12 from 1 November 2011. In addition to this, APD will be devolved to Northern Ireland and we will continue to pursue a reform of APD that will benefit Northern Ireland consumers.
- **Public Transport & Young People** – In January 2011 the Consumer Council, along with YouthAction NI and Translink, published 'Transport Matters', a report that looked at the attitudes and experiences of young people towards public transport. This work was awarded the 'Highly Commended' award from the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Young People and Children (NICCY) for our work to involve young people in decisions that affect their lives. On the back of this work, the Consumer

Council, Translink and Youth Action have piloted a discount travel card for 16-23 year olds which Translink hope to implement in 2012.

- **Access to Air Travel** – The Consumer Council has continued to work with the Department for Transport and the Civil Aviation Authority to represent air passengers with a disability or reduced mobility.
- **Pricing Transparency** – Throughout the year we monitored the cost of airline charges including the fee charged for paying by credit or debit card. We used this information to contribute to an investigation by the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) into surcharges applied when paying by debit or credit card. In December 2011 the Government announced that by the end of 2012 only the actual cost of processing debit and credit card payments can be charged to consumers.

## **6. Expenditure on Energy, Water and Transport**

The indicative cost requirements across each section are not provided as final budgets have not yet been determined.

For information the total budget for each section last year (2011/12) was as follows:

Water was £551,396

Energy was £354,395

Transport was £370,189

## **7. Combined Forward Work Programme for Energy, Water and Transport – 1 April 2012 to 31 March 2013**

The Consumer Council's Energy, Water and Transport work programme for 2012 to 2013 is set out below. The Consumer Council recognises it cannot deliver its objectives in isolation. All of our aims and activities must be fully shared with our stakeholders and many of them delivered in partnership with them.

Alongside the specific deliverables for water, transport and energy our two core statutory functions relating to consumer engagement (outreach) and complaint handling are also presented.

The investigation of complaints across each area and our outreach work to increase awareness and understanding amongst consumers of their rights and responsibilities are essential to directing the work of the Consumer Council, to recognising emerging issues and building a comprehensive evidence base. A continued focus will remain on engaging with consumers through outreach, tackling consumer detriment and raising consumer proficiency.

The priorities contained in the Consumer Council Forward Work Programme continue to address the core aims of the 2011/15 corporate plan (page 4). However recognising the significant pressures consumers' currently face each proposed action has been aligned to tackling issues relating to the **Cost of Living** and/or **Consumer Rights/Proficiency**.

### **Cost of Living**

Northern Ireland consumers are living through tough times and are bracing themselves for even greater challenges ahead. The economy, uncertainty about the future and the cost of living are the biggest concerns for consumers.<sup>12</sup>

Consumers are reigning in their spending and trying to make less go further. In an uncertain economic climate consumers are struggling to make ends meet and have real worries about the impact of public spending cuts and rising prices.

### **Consumer Rights/Proficiency**

Confident consumers knowledgeable about their rights and responsibilities are essential to driving Northern Ireland forward as a region and as a competitive economy. Consumer sensitivity to price and quality promotes efficiency, lowers prices and moderates the behaviour of firms.

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<sup>12</sup> Consumer 2010 - A Consumer Council research report into the attitudes and concerns of a Northern Ireland Consumer in 2010: <http://www.consumerCouncil.org.uk/publications/?id=561>

Consumer proficiency is a term used to describe an individual's knowledge about their consumer rights and their confidence to express these rights and speak up when things go wrong with goods or services they've bought.

Consumer Council research shows that just over half (52 per cent) of consumers felt they were very or fairly well informed about their consumer rights.

Consumer proficiency also deals with a consumer's awareness of where to go for expert consumer help and advice and their ability to proactively protect themselves from scams and ill-advised purchases.

Work Programme	Action by CCNI will include	Outcome	<u>Theme</u>
1. Customer Care Register / Vulnerable Consumers	Secure improvements to and effective promotion of Customer/Critical Care Register(s) to consumers.	Improved level of service from utility companies and increased numbers of consumers on customer/critical care registers.	<b>Consumer Proficiency / Rights</b>
2. Improving Customer Care, Billing and Redress	<p>Identify and address issues which contribute to poor service in specific or localised areas.</p> <p>Work with service providers to improve Customer Service standards.</p> <p>Work with businesses and business bodies to ensure billing accuracy and making bills easier to understand.</p> <p>Promote water and energy efficiency and measures to reduce bills</p>	<p>Local engagement and development of localised solutions</p> <p>Increased consumer confidence</p> <p>Improved bill understanding and accuracy.</p>	<b>Consumer Proficiency/ Rights</b>
3. Promotion of Passenger Rights	<p>Complaint handling and awareness raising for passengers under:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EC Regulation 1107 (Access to Air Travel)</li> <li>• Regulation 261 (Denied Boarding, Cancellations)</li> <li>• EU Regulation 1177 (Sea Passengers) <i>(to be implemented 2012)</i></li> <li>• Complaint handling and awareness</li> </ul>	<p>All consumers who are entitled receive appropriate redress</p> <p>Transport providers amend negative practices and</p> <p>Improved services for passengers</p>	<b>Consumer Proficiency/ Rights</b>

	raising for passengers travelling by public transport		
4. Complaints and Enquiries	<p>Effectively represent consumers with energy, transport and water complaints.</p> <p>Development of positive relationships with all service providers to ensure that complaints and enquiries are dealt with in a timely and consistent manner.</p> <p>Increase awareness and promotion of complaints handling role</p>	<p>Ensure consumers are informed, confident and supported to seek redress when appropriate</p> <p>Support service providers respond effectively and appropriately to consumer complaints and enquiries</p>	<b>Consumer Proficiency/ Rights</b>
5. Regulation working for consumers	<p>Ensure energy markets are working in the interests of all consumers, in particular vulnerable consumers and households in fuel poverty.</p> <p>Progress recommendations from research reports published by the Consumer Council focusing on energy issues (e.g. McIlldoon Report)</p> <p>Off-grid Energy (unregulated) Examine whether off-grid energy suppliers are providing the best possible price and service for consumers, in particular vulnerable consumers and households in fuel poverty.</p> <p>Monitor delivery of PC10 (Water). Work</p>	<p>Ensuring the consumer perspective is reflected in the work of companies and the Utility Regulator;</p> <p>Ensure policy and practices are developed which reflect the needs of consumers</p>	<b>Cost of Living</b>

	<p>with stakeholders to agree outputs and review NI Water's PC13 business plan. Undertaking consumer research and engagement in order to determine priorities for PC15.</p> <p>Contribute (through consumer engagement and research) to developing the DRD 25 year strategic and long-term plan for water in NI, including long term targets.</p>		
6. Fuel Poverty	<p>Continue the work of the Consumer Council in lobbying and developing practical solutions to the eradication of fuel poverty, and improving the affordability of energy in Northern Ireland.</p> <p>Lead (with NEA) the Fuel Poverty Coalition and maintain a Fuel Poverty Coalition Strategy.</p> <p>Through our membership contribute to the DSD Fuel Poverty Forum.</p>	<p>Develop and build support for practical solutions to</p> <p>A coherent strong voice raising priorities and providing recommendations at a political level to tackle fuel poverty</p>	<p><b>Consumer Proficiency / Rights</b></p> <p><b>and</b></p> <p><b>Cost of Living</b></p>
7. Insurance	<p>Household Flood Insurance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Examine the cost of insurance and products offered to households in flood risk areas to identify impact on consumers.</li> <li>• Raise awareness of insurance market</li> </ul>	<p>Review the action undertaken to manage the risk of flooding and identify further opportunities to support consumers.</p>	<p><b>Consumer Proficiency / Rights</b></p> <p><b>and</b></p>

	<p>difficulties in for households insuring flood risk properties.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide advice and information to households in flood risk properties.</li> </ul> <p>Travel Insurance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work with industry regarding insurance products and ensure consumers are informed and get the best product for their needs</li> </ul>	<p>Support consumers who live in flood risk properties</p> <p>Ensure that consumers get the best value for money when purchasing travel insurance and have access to insurance that meets their specific needs.</p>	<b>Cost of Living</b>
8. Public Transport Reform	<p>Advise the Department on passengers current experience of obtaining information about public transport services and recommend steps to improve the information provided to passengers and potential passengers</p> <p>Provide advice and research on encouraging non users to switch to public transport</p> <p>Advise the Department on the customer related key performance indicators against which Translink's service delivery performance should be assessed</p> <p>Conduct research into passengers experience of using transport services funded through the DRD Rural Transport Fund and Transport for People with Disabilities Programme</p>	<p>The impact of our key actions will be as follows:</p> <p>We will be able to give the consumers view of the challenges they face when accessing information about public transport services and make recommendations for improvements.</p> <p>We will be able to advise the Department on non passenger views of what improvements could be made to encourage modal shift to public transport.</p> <p>We will be able to identify what performance measures consumers think Translink should be monitored against and make recommendations to DRD on their proposed approach to contracting.</p>	<b>Consumer Proficiency / Rights</b>  <b>and</b>  <b>Cost of Living</b>

	Involvement and input into the Terms of Reference for the feasibility study on new ticketing arrangements to be carried out by Translink	Obtain consumers views on their experiences and issues when using services funded by DRD Rural Transport fund and Transport for People with Disabilities programme.	
9. Consumer engagement and outreach	<p>Increase awareness and understanding amongst consumers of their rights and responsibilities and how to exercise these effectively</p> <p>To increase the confidence and capability of consumers' within the marketplace</p>	<p>Informed consumers will help drive improvements within the marketplace and ensure their rights are respected.</p> <p>Improving consumer proficiency will ensure consumers make appropriate and informed purchasing decisions.</p>	<p><b>Consumer Proficiency / Rights</b></p> <p><b>and</b></p> <p><b>Cost of Living</b></p>

## **Annex 1      Statutory Duties in Energy, Water and Transport**

The Energy (NI) Order 2003 gave the Consumer Council extended powers and an expanded remit with responsibility for representing the interests of electricity consumers in Northern Ireland. The Consumer Council has the statutory duty to represent water and sewerage consumers under The Water and Sewerage Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006.

The Consumer Council's statutory functions and duties are laid down in each of these Orders and include:

- The function of
  - making proposals or providing advice and information about consumer matters
  - representing the views of consumers on such matters
  - obtaining and keeping under review information about consumer issues and the views of consumers on those matters
- a duty to investigate and seek to resolve consumer complaints against companies about regulated matters
- the function of giving information to Ministers, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation (NIAUR), licence holders and any other body with a consumer interest, such as local authorities
- the ability to publish information about:
  - complaints made against energy suppliers, transporters, distributors and water and sewerage companies both directly to the Consumer Council and also to the relevant licensee
- a specific duty to “have regard” to the interests of
  - individuals who are disabled or chronically sick
  - individuals of pensionable age
  - individuals with low incomes
  - individuals residing in rural areas
- a wide power to investigate any matter which appears to be a matter relating to the interests of consumers in relation to gas conveyed through pipes or electricity conveyed through distribution systems or water and sewerage services
- powers to publish information where we think it would be in the consumer interest
- the requirement in each financial year to publish a forward work programme containing a general description of the projects that we plan to undertake the following year.

The Consumer Council has an agreed combined Memorandum of Understanding with the Utility Regulator, which fosters an open, constructive and effective relationship between the two bodies, while respecting their different emphases.

The Energy Order and Water Order require the Consumer Council to publish a forward work programme for each financial year, but before doing so it must consult on a draft of the Programme to allow it to consider any representations and comments made.

The General Consumer Council (Northern Ireland) Order 1984 sets out the functions of the Council in relation to transport:

5.—(1) The Council shall consider and, where it appears to it to be desirable, make recommendations with respect to any matter affecting road or railway passenger transport services and facilities in Northern Ireland and services and facilities provided for passengers travelling to and from Northern Ireland.

(2) The Transport Users' Committee established under section 1 of the M1 Transport Act (Northern Ireland) 1967 is hereby abolished and the Council shall exercise the functions heretofore exercisable by the Transport Users' Committee under sections 6(2) and (3), 59(1) and (2) and 60(2) of that Act.