



The Consumer Council

**Combined Energy, Water and Transport
Forward Work Programme
1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015**

April 2014

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1. Introduction

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 food¹. These 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;
- Achieving redress for consumers by investigating complaints to secure the best possible outcome; and
- Publishing information in the consumer interest.

The Consumer Council is also a designated body for the purposes of supercomplaints², which means that we can refer any consumer affairs goods and services issue to the Office of Fair Trading (OFT)³, where we feel that the market may be harming consumers' best interests. In December 2013 the Consumer Council was awarded 'super-complainant' status for financial services, and will now have additional powers to bring super-complaints on financial matters to the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA).⁴

On 1 April 2014 responsibility for the statutory functions in relation to consumer representation on postal services in Northern Ireland will transfer from Consumer Futures (CF) to the Consumer Council.

¹ 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.

² The Enterprise Act 2002 (Part 9 Restrictions on Disclosure of Information) (Amendment and Specification) <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2003/1400/schedules/made>

³ 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/>

⁴ Financial Services Act 2012

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 NI consumers. 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.

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

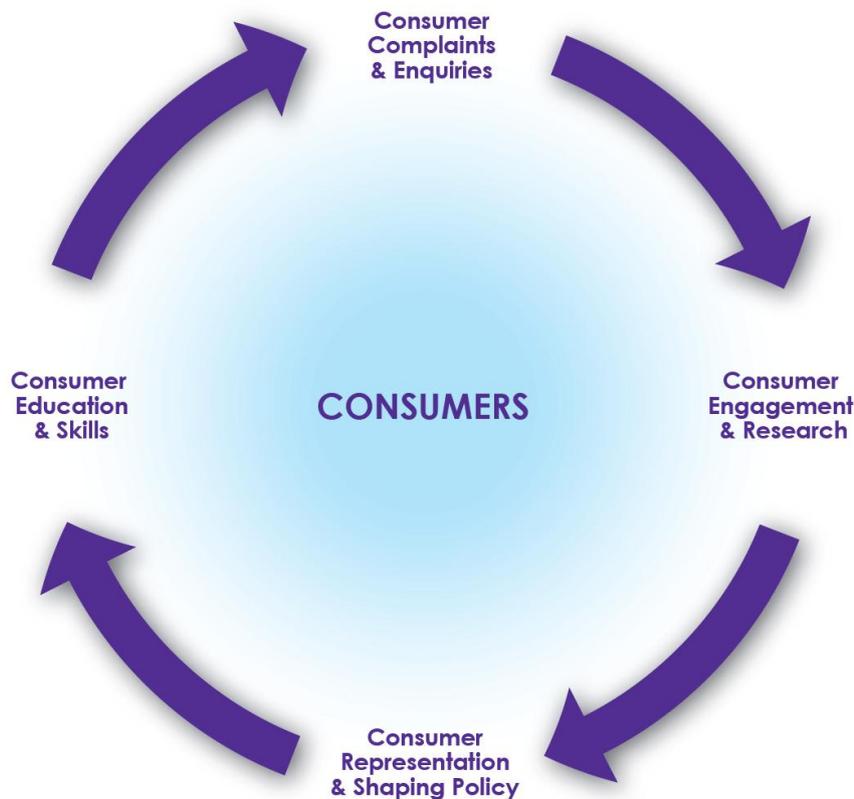
We consulted for twelve weeks from 23 December 2013 until 21 March 2014.

From 1 April 2014 we will also have a duty to consult on our Forward Work Programme for post under the Public Bodies (Abolition of the National Consumer Council and Transfer of the Office of Fair Trading's Functions in relation to Estate Agents etc) Order 2014.

The Consumer Council is pleased to present its integrated Forward Work Programme for the three work areas of Energy, Water and Transport for 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015. This year, as good practice, we have also included reference to some of the work we plan to undertake in relation to postal services, although some plans are currently being finalised nationally.

2. Our Approach

Our approach is simple, straightforward and delivers for consumers. The Consumer Council's integrated model for consumer representation forms a cycle of enquiry and complaint investigation and resolution; consumer engagement and research; policy development and advocacy; and consumer education, outreach and promotion of consumer skills to improve consumer proficiency to make consumers aware of their rights and responsibilities. The Consumer Council has a clear focus on local issues affecting consumers and works across a broad range of issues including financial services, transport, energy, water and consumer education. The diagram below broadly illustrates how our functions work together and support and inform each other.



Our Forward Work Programme has been developed in line with our Corporate Plan for 2011/2015 which was developed following a programme of consumer research and stakeholder engagement. In March 2014 Council Members agreed that the Consumer Council should not develop and consult on a new Corporate Plan during 2014–15 and that the current plan should be extended for one year to align with the extension of the current NI Executive Programme for Government.

The Consumer Council’s Corporate Plan sets out its mission statement and values: *“Making the Consumer Voice Heard and Making it Count”* and our values *“Integrity, Responsibility, Courage and Innovation”*.

This combined Energy, Water and Transport Forward Work Programme has been developed to contribute to our core aims for 2011/15 which are:

1. Championing and protecting the interests of consumers;
2. Informing and empowering consumers;
3. Ensuring public policy reflects the needs of today’s and tomorrow’s consumer; and

4. Ensuring the Consumer Council is fit for purpose and delivers value for money.

The Forward Work Programme will form part of the Consumer Council's Operating Plan for 2014/15 and will be a key contributor to progressing our core aims.

3. The Context of the 2014/15 Forward Work Programme

This Forward Work Programme covers the fourth year of the Consumer Council's Corporate Plan for 2011/15.

Spending power in Northern Ireland has fallen further behind the UK average. Households in NI have been hardest hit by the fall in disposable income, with just £60 left per week after bills and essentials compared to an average UK household with £158⁵ a week of discretionary income meaning the UK average is now over two and a half times higher than that of NI. The disparity between the NI and UK average discretionary incomes is also increasing – in 2013 the UK average was 2.64 times higher than that of NI, compared to 2.58 in 2012. This weakness in household income growth continues to constrain spending power and places a strain on many NI households.

Consumer Council research in November 2011 found that 47 per cent of NI consumers were concerned about their ability to make ends meet. When asked how they were keeping up with bills and credit commitments, 34 per cent of consumers said they were struggling from time to time and ten per cent said it was a constant struggle⁶.

Energy

Whilst consumers have seen further increases in their energy prices during 2013, competition has continued to develop in both the natural gas and electricity markets. This has resulted in a continued increase in the numbers of consumers switching their supplier in both electricity and gas. Although this has brought reduced energy bills for many consumers there remains a need to maintain awareness of switching and the benefits consumers can realise from switching. Therefore the Consumer Council

⁵ Source: Asda Income Tracker Report October 2013

⁶ Source: Consumer Council report Hard to Stomach, the impact of rising food costs for NI consumers January 2013

will proactively engage with consumers and stakeholder organisations to promote the benefits of switching.

However, competition can also bring confusion for consumers and a more difficult energy market to monitor. Therefore it is timely that the implementation of new consumer protection arrangements introduced as a result of the European Regulations known as IME3, will continue to be strengthened by the implementation of new draft Codes of Practice for energy suppliers and distributors. The Consumer Council played an important role in supporting the implementation of the first tranche of the draft provisions which came into effect in 2013, and will focus on continuing our work with the Utility Regulator to implement the final draft of these codes, and the development and implementation of the monitoring and enforcement processes that will support the operation of the codes. We will also continue to identify and highlight areas where consumers still lack sufficient protection.

Sixty eight per cent of homes in NI are still reliant on home heating oil as a source of heating. This reliance is a contributing factor to the 42 per cent of homes that are living in fuel poverty. This is compounded by limited options to 'pay as you go' particularly for consumers who are experiencing a financial strain.

March 2014 saw a welcome 15.6 per cent drop in the average 500 litre fill. However, with prices subject to a number of external factors including international wholesale prices, consumers cannot be guaranteed that price will not increase over the coming months and the overall trend has been that of steady increase in price, one which consumers have seen across all energy costs.

While it is not possible to have a direct impact on prices, the Consumer Council has been working with the Northern Ireland Oil Federation (NIOF) on an expanded Customer Charter. The charter provides consumers with guaranteed service standards and a complaints process which involves the Consumer Council. We will continue to work with the NIOF to ensure the Customer Charter provides the maximum consumer protection.

During 2013, the Consumer Council continued to give a voice to consumers on important strategic energy issues that will have a significant impact on them for many years. The implementation of key aspects of the Department of Enterprise Trade and Industry's (DETI) Energy Bill, which

has the potential to make a real difference to consumers was delayed during 2013, particularly the proposal for an obligation on all energy suppliers (including the home heating oil sector) to provide energy efficiency measures. Whilst this has the potential to improve energy efficiency and reduce fuel poverty, the overall financial impact on all consumers needs to be carefully considered to inform the approach for implementation. This will be a key issue for the Consumer Council to assess on behalf of consumers during 2014.

There is also a range of key government energy policy proposals during 2014 that will affect consumers. Issues such as Gas to the West and Security of Supply may have a financial impact on consumers therefore the Consumer Council will closely monitor developments and work with DETI and the Utility Regulator to represent consumers' needs and views.

Water

The ongoing strain on many households' finances means that the continued deferral of domestic water charges is welcome news for consumers. Whether or not direct domestic charges are introduced post 2016, it remains that consumers want and deserve high quality water and sewerage services delivered efficiently by a responsive consumer focused organisation.

Like many households, businesses are struggling through the continued harsh economic times. We must also deliver efficient and reliable services for the 70,000 non-domestic customers who pay directly for water and sewerage.

2014 - 2015 is the final year of NI Water's second Price Control, PC13. Indications are that NI Water will perform well against many of the targets set for it by the Utility Regulator. Working closely with our partners through the Minister's Partnership Agreement we will monitor NI Water's performance as PC13 comes to a close and we make preparations for the next investment period of PC15.

PC15 is a six year Price Control covering 2015 - 2021. To place the consumer at the centre as plans develop we carried out extensive consumer research during 2013 - 2014 through the Consumer Engagement Oversight Group, a partnership of the Consumer Council, NI Water, the Utility Regulator and the Department for Regional Development (DRD). The findings have already informed the Ministerial

Social and Environmental Guidance and the development of NI Water's Business Plan. A summary report can be found on the Consumer Council's website - www.consumercouncil.org.uk/publications/connecting-with-consumers

Over 2014 -2015 we will be working to make sure we are ready for the start of PC15 and that well developed plans are in place. We will be scrutinising and challenging NI Water's plans and the Utility Regulator's determinations to ensure they deliver for consumers at the right price.

The NI Executive's 24 year Long Term Water Strategy (LTWS) continues to be developed and we expect a draft strategy to be produced for public consultation during 2014 - 2015. Building on previous research to inform the development of policies contained within the draft LTWS we will be doing more work with consumers to check that the draft strategy reflects their aspirations for the sustainable management of all aspects of our water environment.

The risk of flooding continues to blight the lives of many consumers. The challenges to reduce this risk are many and significant. The increased strategic focus being afforded to flooding across the NI Executive, its Departments and Agencies is welcome and has begun to provide the joined up planning and response consumers want from local to regional level. We have started to see more continuity of planning from building resilience and preparedness through response and into recovery with the hope that consumers will no longer feel they fall between the 'gaps' in stages or the various flood organisations. 2014 - 2015 will be an important year in delivering on the ground for consumers living in flood risk areas.

The heavy snow in March 2013 reminded us all that extreme circumstances can come at any time. The Consumer Council has continued to engage with NI Water and others to make sure consumer needs and priorities are at the fore when developing improved co-ordinated responses and information in crisis situations.

Transport

Public transport has been going through a significant process of legislative change and 2014 will see the delivery of one of the fundamental changes.

A contract will exist between Transport NI and Translink for the delivery of public transport services. The development of Key Performance Indicators as part of this contract will be a significant opportunity for DRD to develop new customer focused measures that reflect the priorities of passengers.

Statistics show that public transport passenger numbers continue to grow. Making sure that the performance of Translink is measured against the indicators that are important to consumers needs to be a key focus for Transport NI.

Consumers in NI are heavily dependent on our air and sea links for economic and social well being. When travel plans are disrupted it can cause significant distress for consumers. The Consumer Council dealt with over 500 complaints and enquiries in relation to disrupted air travel. This was largely from passengers whose flights were delayed or cancelled but also from passengers with a mobility issue that need special assistance to access air or sea travel.

The review of Regulation (EC) 261/2004 in relation to air passengers' rights has the potential to reduce the level of protection for consumers. The Consumer Council will continue to highlight the need for robust regulations to protect consumers to the relevant Members of the European Parliament.

In addition to the European Regulations that protect air passenger rights (EU 261 and EU 1107), there is now the Maritime Passenger Rights Regulation (EU 1177) that provides ferry passengers with rights when travelling with a reduced mobility or services are delayed or cancelled. The Consumer Council is the recognised complaint handling body in NI for each of these Regulations and is committed to continuing to work with service providers to ensure that the rights of passengers are met.

The provision of passenger rights is only of benefit if consumers are aware of them. During the year the Consumer Council has worked with key stakeholder groups, transport services providers and the media to promote awareness of passengers' rights and to encourage any passenger to contact the Consumer Council for further information. We will continue to do this through 2014 - 2015.

Post

The transfer of responsibility for postal services in April 2014 is a new opportunity for both the Consumer Council and postal consumers in NI.

The postal industry has undergone significant changes in recent years. Most recently we have witnessed the move of Royal Mail from public into private ownership in October 2013. It is inevitable that a privatised Royal Mail will seek good commercial rates of return and efficiencies across its business. Consumers will want more innovation whilst maintaining high standards and quality of service. They will want Royal Mail to trim costs, but not to let service standards decline, increase prices or shut out competition.

The Universal Service Obligation (USO) which provides a uniform postal tariff across the UK, with delivery to each address six days per week has been secured under the Postal Services Act 2011 and can only be changed with Parliamentary agreement through an affirmative resolution procedure. However, the USO is based on historic consumer need and changes may be necessary to ensure postal services in today's fast paced digital communication environment are relevant to consumers. The postal needs of business consumers are becoming increasingly divergent from residential consumers, so working with Royal Mail on the development of its products and services will be vital to help sustain the USO into the future.

NI consumers are avid internet shoppers and this has fuelled competition in a rapidly growing parcels market. However, despite their affinity for online shopping, NI consumers are more likely to experience delivery issues such as poorer choice, value and limited options, than most of their UK counterparts⁷. Work has recently commenced and will continue into 2014 - 2015 on helping to address this imbalance and to educate retailers and consumers on this issue. The UK Department of Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) recently established a Summit on parcel delivery charges with e-retailers, consumer groups, couriers and enforcement groups. The Summit aims to ensure consumers get a fair deal when buying goods online within the UK and to provide guidance for the eRetail industry on

⁷ Online delivery problems: UK average six per cent versus six per cent for Northern Ireland. [Ofcom Communication Market Report 2013]

how it can better serve and inform all consumers throughout the UK, regardless of their location.

Post Offices are not only 'counters' for Royal Mail products but provide access to public services and to financial products from high street banks as well as the Post Office Card Account. Digital by Default and Universal Credit may make their role in providing access to such services even more important.

We are likely to see further progress in Post Office Limited's Network Transformation Programme, with many of NI's 480 post office branches converting to two new cost-effective Post Office models – called PO Local and PO Main. Some of these conversions will happen on-site (i.e. within the existing premises with same owners), however, it is likely that increasing numbers will take place off-site (change of ownership and move to alternative premises in a nearby location). At the same time, changes announced in December 2013 to the Network Transformation Programme may see many communities across NI affected by compulsory changes to the branch network; this will affect many post office consumers in NI, particularly those living in rural, rural fringe and urban deprived locations.

4. Key Achievements to date from the 2013/14 Forward Work Programme

Energy

Consumer Protection – The Consumer Council continued to work closely with the Utility Regulator and the energy industry to implement the new EU consumer protection framework (IME3). This included developing and implementing Codes of Practice covering complaints, customer information and marketing which have increased the levels of consumer protection for energy customers.

We carried out research into the effectiveness of the Consumer Council's role in the regulatory process and identified areas for development that will bring increased protection to consumers.

Home Heating Oil – A revised Code of Practice with the NIOF was agreed to further enhance the increased protection for consumers including the role of the Consumer Council to investigate complaints against oil suppliers (which are members of the NIOF).

Fuel Poverty – Along with the Housing Executive, Bryson Charitable Group and National Energy Action (NEA) we piloted an energy brokering scheme which will bring more affordable energy to groups of consumers in the North West.

Consumer awareness of shopping around, switching energy supplier and fuel poverty reduction measures such as oil purchasing clubs was increased due to our engagement with consumers at public events.

We maintained our role as a key member of the Fuel Poverty Coalition which provided a critical channel for maintaining the consumer voice on fuel poverty issues amongst politicians and Government Departments including contributing to the Coalition's main conference: Fuel Poverty- 'Running on Empty'.

Regulation – Both oral and written evidence was provided to the Competition Commission inquiry into the Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) Price Control known as RP5 which resulted in a reduction in the increase to consumers' bills requested by NIE. We represented consumers on the Power NI Price Control and the firmus energy and Phoenix Gas (PNG) Distribution Price Control (GD14).

We also represented consumers during tariff reviews for the regulated gas and electricity suppliers in NI ensuring that any proposed increases were unavoidable and kept to a minimum.

Through our intervention we succeeded in securing an agreement between NIE and the Utility Regulator to re-open the appeals process associated with the severe weather events in 2013. This resulted in a revised and simpler process being implemented by the Utility Regulator to deal with the appeals.

Policy – We responded to a wide range of government and regulatory policy consultations including: Gas to the West, The Renewable Heat Incentive, EU Energy Efficiency Directive and the Energy Order to ensure that the key energy issues for consumers such as price, availability of energy and security of supply are inherent in DETI's final proposals.

To inform our policy work we commissioned research into a range of energy areas including renewable energy, home heating oil, and Gas to the West to inform a robust consumer response to current and proposed Government energy policy proposals. We published a report detailing the findings of our research into Energy Efficiency schemes in NI. The research findings will be used in our work with the Utility Regulator, DETI and energy companies to ensure consumer needs and priorities are included in future pricing and policy proposals.

Water

Price Controls – With stakeholders we monitored NI Water’s progress towards PC13 targets. We led on the consumer research to inform plans for PC15. We are developing with NI Water and the Utility Regulator a more meaningful measurement of consumer satisfaction that will help us understand more about what NI Water is getting right and where improvements are needed.

Working with Businesses – We continued our partnership with Invest NI and NI Water to deliver water efficiency publications and tools directly to businesses and farms. This has helped promote water efficiency and help businesses and farms find the right information to improve their water efficiency and save money on their bills.

Water Champions – An award for businesses and farms that have demonstrated how they have saved water and money. The first Water Champion Award was presented in December 2012. Nine have been awarded to date ranging from individual farms and large IT firms to educational institutions. In the final quarter of 2013 - 2014 we plan to return to these Champions to assess the benefits of the water efficiency steps they have taken. Just one Champion estimates annual water savings of c£6,000 through implementing water efficiency measures. The Water Champions campaign works in partnership with Invest NI’s existing program “Boosting Business” which supports NI businesses to help improve their competitiveness, productivity and sustainability by delivering a range of activities to identify and achieve cost savings in the consumption of water, energy and raw materials.

Flooding – We provided information to the NI Executive about consumers’ views on flood risk, flooding response, resistance and resilience. We

updated our three flooding information leaflets for consumers and developed community resilience plans with partners on the Regional Community Resilience Group that will be piloted during 2014 - 2015. We continue to represent consumers on all Local Flood forums and in the development of a NI Reservoirs Bill. We met with UK Government and insurance industry representatives to ensure the NI consumer was represented in the development of future plans for the provision of affordable flood insurance.

Local Issues – Building on previous success in identifying and resolving local issues the Consumer Council has been publicising that we are here to help not just individual domestic or business complaints but also communities that may be affected by a water or sewerage service issue.

Transport

Supporting passengers with delayed and cancelled flights – During the year, the Consumer Council reached an agreement with the Civil Aviation Authority to accept case referrals in relation to passengers resident in Northern Ireland. For the period April - December 2013 the Consumer Council has helped over 500 passengers and secured **£34,575.63** in refunds and compensation.

Review of Regulation (EC) 261/2004 – The Consumer Council has engaged with Members of the European Parliament to seek support for amendments to the legislative proposal that strengthen passengers' rights when flights are delayed or cancelled.

Passengers' Rights - Train the Trainer – Making sure passengers can exercise their rights when things go wrong is an important part of the Consumer Council's work. Train the Trainer sessions on air and sea passenger rights were delivered in Newry, Belfast, Craigavon and Derry/Londonderry. Participants from a range of organisations including local community groups, constituency office staff and organisations representing consumers with disabilities took part. By training key support workers in a range of organisations it is possible to meet the needs of a much wider audience.

Petrol and Diesel Costs – During the year the Consumer Council continued to highlight the impact high fuel prices are having on consumers. Our

political representatives have been very active in keeping this issue high on the agenda in Westminster which was evidenced when the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced that the planned fuel duty increase for September 2013 was to be cancelled.

Evidence to the Committee for Regional Development – The Committee conducted an extensive inquiry into the structures of public transport in NI. The Consumer Council was pleased to be called to give evidence to Members and continues to support the Committee in its work to ensure that public transport services are delivered in the most efficient, cost effective manner with the interests of passengers at the centre.

Translink Passenger Charter – During the year the Consumer Council worked closely with Translink and DRD to develop a revised passenger charter. This charter (which asks over 2,000 passengers for their views each year) is Translink's commitment to its passengers and it is therefore essential that the issues that are of most importance to passengers are being adequately and effectively monitored. The Consumer Council continues to work with DRD and Translink to monitor the results of the survey to ensure that services meet passengers' needs and that any concerns are being addressed.

Complaints and Enquiries

Complaints and Enquiries 1 April 2013 to 31 March 2014

Nature of Complaint	Enquiry	Stage 1 Investigation	Stage 1 Referral	Stage 2 Complaint	Total
Air	560	8	4	225	797
Bus	89	11	18	30	148
CCNI	542	0	0	0	542
Electricity	1231	27	31	54	1343
Ferry	10	1	0	2	13
Natural Gas	184	8	3	6	201
Other Energy	30	0	0	0	30
Rail	9	0	8	10	27
Water	282	33	17	41	373
Total	2937	88	81	368	3474

The 542 CCNI contacts are requests from consumers seeking copies of our literature or advice relating to energy, transport and water.

As a direct result of our complaint work from 1 April 2013 to 31 March 2014, **£488,299.54** 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.

Providing an effective and efficient independent and free complaint and enquiry handling service will continue as a central part of the Consumer Council's work.

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5. Expenditure on Energy, Water and Transport

The confirmed budgets for Energy, Water and Transport for 2014/15 are:

Energy £578,715

Water £413,673

Transport £277,047.

6. Combined Forward Work Programme for Energy, Water, Transport and Post - 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015

The Consumer Council's combined draft Energy, Water and Transport Work Programme for 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015 is set out below with projects to be undertaken in relation to post that will be NI specific.

Work Programme	Action by the Consumer Council will include	Outcome	Theme
<p>1. Promotion of Passenger Rights and Aviation Policy</p>	<p>Undertaking a range of events in respect of passengers rights under EU Regulations 261/2004 (flight delays and cancellations), 1107/2006 (disabled air passengers) and 1177/2010 (disabled ferry passengers), including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotion at key travel times of passenger rights and responsibilities when flights and sailings delayed or cancelled. • Delivering a range of events with partner organisations to promote awareness of disabled passengers' rights. • Lobbying in relation to the EU review of Regulation 261 and EU Slot allocation. • Assessment of passenger awareness of maritime regulations via the Stena Passenger Survey. • Conducting airport accessibility audits. • Conducting online assessment of 	<p>Consumers entitled to appropriate redress will be given support in resolving complaints</p> <p>Transport providers will be able to improve services based on consumer feedback</p> <p>Consumers will have a greater understanding of their rights</p> <p>Promotion of the needs of NI consumers at an EU level</p>	<p>Consumer Proficiency/ Rights</p>

	passengers' awareness of their rights.		
2. Efficient and effective complaints handling service	<p>Investigate consumer complaints and enquiries in line with agreed protocols with energy, transport and water service providers</p> <p>Secure redress for consumers where appropriate</p> <p>Ensure a customer satisfaction rate of at least 95 per cent in complaints handling</p>	Redress system working for all consumers	Consumer Proficiency/ Rights
3. Energy Regulation	<p>Representing consumers in all key energy regulatory issues through the development of a clear and robust consumer evidence to inform:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Utility Regulator's proposed electricity and gas tariff reviews • The Utility Regulator's final proposals relating to 'Gas to the West' licensing issues • Government policy developments on Electricity Market Reform 	Consumers' views and interests will be reflected in all regulated energy tariff reviews and policy proposals throughout 2014/15	Cost of Living

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Gas Market Opening strategy for the 'Ten Towns' • The out workings of the Competition Commission decisions on RP5 (NIE) • The out workings of the GD14 Gas Price Control <p>The Consumer Council will continue to work with the Utility Regulator and energy companies to implement, monitor and enforce the consumer protection measures contained within IME3</p>	<p>Levels of protection for all current and new electricity and gas consumers to be increased throughout 2014/15 specifically in the areas of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vulnerable Customers • Complaints Handling • Marketing and Sales • Dealing with Debt 	
4. Fuel Affordability	<p>Further enhancing the Customer Charter with NIOF to improve protection and benefits to consumers</p> <p>Developing and delivering an 'Energy Switching' programme of events to specific consumer groups</p> <p>Continuing to develop the established partnership arrangements with Bryson Energy and NEA to further enhance approaches for fuel brokering through</p>	<p>Increased level of protection for all home heating oil consumers across NI throughout 2014/15</p> <p>By September 2014 consumers will have appropriate information to make informed choices regarding energy bills and the process of 'switching'</p> <p>Establishment of new cost reduction models for home heating oil available</p>	<p>Consumer Proficiency/ Rights</p> <p>and</p> <p>Cost of Living</p>

	<p>area based approaches</p> <p>Maintaining membership of the Fuel Poverty Coalition to continue to lobby policymakers to reduce fuel poverty</p>	<p>for fuel poor households in specific areas</p>	
5. Renewables	<p>Renewables work will have two strands: Micro or domestic generation. Examining at the market at all levels and insuring it's working for consumers. Looking at potential issues that could be detrimental to consumers given that this is an emerging and un-regulated energy market.</p> <p>Large scale generation and renewable what initiatives such as this actually cost consumers. If this work has been done then it is not within the public domain or is difficult to find. The project will deal with the lack of public awareness of renewables.</p>	<p>Improved protection and education for consumers considering using renewable technology.</p> <p>Greater clarity for consumers on renewable energy, the cost and benefits involved and its impacts.</p>	
6. Impact of Government Energy Policy	<p>Direct consumer research to gauge the attitude of consumers to the developing major energy initiatives of :</p> <p>Smart metering Tyrone to Cavan Interconnector</p>	<p>Ensure consumers are represented as Fuel Poverty issues will continue to be inherent in the policy making of the Executive, government departments and energy companies throughout 2014/15</p>	<p>Consumer Proficiency/ Rights and</p>

			Cost of Living
7. Public Transport	<p>Undertake a range of activities in support of the Public Transport Reform Programme, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participating in the Public Transport Reform Stakeholder Forum and liaison with DRD. • Providing comments on any proposed fare changes or service changes. • Monitoring the reporting of progress against key performance indicators as part of DRD/Translink’s new contracting arrangement. • Working in partnership with Translink on the integrated ticketing project. <p>Continuing work with Translink on passenger complaints, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holding customer complaint meetings with Translink. • Engaging in bi-monthly communication meetings with 	<p>Ensure that consumers’ needs and concerns about public transport are identified and addressed through passenger centred policy development and appropriate complaint handling procedures and responses</p>	Consumer Proficiency/ Rights and Cost of Living

	<p>Translink and DRD and in Passenger Charter monitoring meetings.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Following up the review of Translink complaint handling procedures to assess improvements. <p>Supporting the identification of consumer travel needs to inform the roll out of public transport plans, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working with DRD’s Transport Planning team to agree a joint research project to identify consumer travel needs and agreed, defined areas. • Involvement in DRD steering groups of Dungannon pilot of Local Public Transport Plans. • Following up recommendations from the Consumer Council’s research on passenger information, the Dungannon pilot and other research. <p>Continuing to promote the public transport requirements of disabled people in conjunction with key stakeholders, including the Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (IMTAC) Monitor and report sample petrol and</p>	<p>Improved passenger awareness of best value tickets</p> <p>Development of a new ticketing offering which meets the needs of passengers</p> <p>Ensure consumers are empowered to access lower petrol and diesel prices; ensure the Consumer Council can lobby industry and Government to deliver price transparency for consumers</p>	
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	diesel prices across Northern Ireland major towns and cities		
8. Consumer engagement and outreach	<p>Increase awareness and understanding amongst consumers of their rights and responsibilities and how to exercise these effectively pre, during and post purchase</p> <p>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>Consumer Proficiency/ Rights</p> <p>and</p> <p>Cost of Living</p>
9. Water Price Control and Strategy	<p>Undertaking a range of activities in support of PC15 and the development and implementation of the Long Term Water Strategy, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responding to the Utility Regulator’s draft determination on NI Water’s PC15 business plan. • Conducting research on consumer acceptance of the draft Long Term Water Strategy to inform the public consultation. • Beginning a ‘tracker’ survey of consumer satisfaction. • Designing an improved measure of consumer satisfaction for consumers. • Developing an education programme 	<p>Feedback and advice provided to the Utility Regulator on its draft determination on NI Water’s PC15 business plan by the end of December 2014 to ensure that it meets the needs of consumers.</p> <p>Feedback and advice to inform the development of the draft Long Term Water Strategy provided to DRD by the end of August 2014 to ensure that it meets the needs of consumers.</p> <p>Improve service standards and complaint handling</p>	<p>Consumer Proficiency/ Rights</p> <p>and</p> <p>Cost of Living</p>

	<p>to support the implementation of PC15.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Completing a review of NI Water’s suite of Codes of Practice • Conducting an annual assessment of NI Water’s written complaint handling and reviewing the possibilities for extending this approach to other contact methods. 	<p>Improved consumer education on key issues such as water efficiency and disposal in sewers</p>	
10.Flooding	<p>Working in partnership with government departments and agencies on a range of activities in respect of flood planning and management, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The development of draft flood risk management plans. • The development of a policy on Individual Property Protection, and raising awareness of this. • Supporting area pilots in respect of community resilience to help people prevent or mitigate the impacts of flooding. 	<p>Feedback and advice provided on draft flood risk plans to government departments and agencies by the end of December 2014 to ensure that they reflect the needs of consumers.</p> <p>Feedback and advice provided to government departments and agencies on the implementation of an individual flood protection policy within the timetable agreed by the Minister to ensure that it reflects the needs of consumers.</p> <p>Consumers in ten pilot areas benefit from new community resilience flood</p>	Consumer Proficiency

		plans, with lessons learned for a wider roll out to other NI communities.	
11. Consumers' private water and sewerage infrastructure	Undertake consumer research to inform the development of Government strategy for consumer owned private water and sewerage pipes	Feedback and advice to inform the development of government strategy for private water and sewerage pipes provided to the Department for Regional Development by the end of August 2014 to ensure that it meets the needs of consumers.	Consumer Proficiency/ Rights and Cost of Living
12. Water billing and efficiency for homes and businesses	Undertaking a range of activities to promote water efficiency and measures to reduce bills, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognising and promoting 'Water Champions'. • Working with NI Water to increase accuracy/clarity of billing information. 	Appointment of 20 Water Champions. Feedback and advice provided to NI Water on its self-service billing facility to increase accuracy/clarity of billing information for consumers, in accordance with the timetable agreed with NI Water. Completion of a review of NI Water's Scheme of Charges and associated documents, and Codes of Practice, with feedback and advice provided by end March 2015 to increase protection for consumers.	Consumer Proficiency/ Rights and Cost of Living

<p>13. Transfer of postal service representation to the Consumer Council</p>	<p>Public launch and transfer of postal consumer representation from Consumer Futures (Post) to the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NI wide communication strategy to publically announce the transfer • Public events around Northern Ireland to mark the transfer of responsibility • Briefing documents produced to explain new role to consumers and stakeholders <p>Postal Services Monitoring:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain a watching brief on how well the Universal Service Obligation serves communities across Northern Ireland, with a particular focus on post-box numbers and location and quality of service reliability • Consider whether a newly privatised Royal Mail continues to meet the needs of consumers in Northern Ireland • Respond to any consultations on regulatory changes, price setting and target setting on behalf of Northern 	<p>Greater awareness of postal consumer protection for Northern Ireland consumers</p> <p>Informed postal consumers, aware of their rights under postal services and knowledge of how to make a successful postal complaint</p> <p>An efficient modern Universal Postal Service, fit for today's consumer needs</p> <p>Northern Ireland consumers' views will be reflected in all UK postal policy and regulatory changes</p>	<p>Consumer Proficiency/ Rights</p>
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	Ireland postal consumers		
14. Sustainable Post Office Network	<p>Network Transformation Programme</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working with Citizens Advice and Citizens Advice Scotland, we will monitor the conversion programme across the UK using geographical modelling to understand the likely impact of programme outcomes on local areas and groups of consumers. We will also identify any emerging detriment for consumers and propose appropriate action. Working with Post Office Limited we will continue to undertake in-depth case handling of individual post office conversions in Northern Ireland. <p>Northern Ireland post office network as an access to cash</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Undertake research to provide a better understanding of the role post offices play in addressing financial inclusion in Northern Ireland, as well as the importance financial services provide in helping to sustain the post office network. 	<p>Support post office customers and communities to influence the future of the post office network and ensure it meets their changing, long-term needs.</p> <p>Consumer views are heard, fully considered and addressed by Post Office Limited for each proposed conversion.</p> <p>A more sustainable post office network in Northern Ireland, which will play a crucial role in financial inclusion within Northern Ireland communities, particularly rural and remote areas.</p>	Consumer Proficiency/ Rights

	<p>Post office Diversification Fund in Northern Ireland</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working in partnership with Post Office Limited, the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters, and the Northern Ireland All-Party Group on Postal Services we will continue to lobby for the introduction of a Post Office Diversification Fund 		
<p>15. Parcel Deliveries</p>	<p>Online Shopping Consumer Education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prior to Christmas 2014, we will develop consumer friendly information materials for online shoppers, including a focus on potential parcel delivery issues. This material will explain new rights under the Consumer Rights Directive and how to get redress when things go wrong <p>Parcel Delivery Detriment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Building on existing research already undertaken by Consumer Futures, we will investigate the costs for Northern Ireland online shoppers and businesses because of poor choice, value and availability of delivery options 	<p>Informed consumers will have a greater understanding and awareness of their rights and protections in relation to online shopping and drive improvements within the parcel delivery market</p> <p>The detriment to Northern Ireland customers will be robustly measured and an evidence base established to ensure consumer need is reflected and promoted at NI, UK and EU level, which will give greater confidence and expand consumer choices</p>	<p>Consumer Proficiency/ Rights</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• We will participate and represent Northern Ireland consumers within the UK Parliament BIS parcel summit, which will seek to provide clearer and upfront information from e-Retailers on delivery costs		
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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 (The Utility Regulator), 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.