

Interview with Eleanor Gill

Chief Executive of the Consumer Council in Northern Ireland



Eleanor Gill

‘Credit unions need to find a balance between trying to attract larger savers and borrowers and maintaining the best of the current service for existing members’.

Tell us a bit about yourself, your hobbies, interests, etc?

I love people and I love life! I have a positive and cheerful outlook and have much to be thankful for. I have been married for more years than my husband, Damien, may wish to remember and we are very proud of our two sons, Eoghan and Oisin.

I have always been very lucky to work with good and committed people who have inspired me and given me great joy. This is particularly the case in the Consumer Council where my Chairman, Steve Costello, the Council members and my staff have been an incredible source of support, learning, friendship and fun. One thing is for sure in the Consumer Council – we do our best and we don't take ourselves too seriously!

Throughout my career I have always been driven by the desire to make a real difference. I particularly enjoy working in partnership with consumers and their representatives to bring about changes whether that is in bank charges, water charges or seatbelts on buses.

I enjoy hill-walking, music, travelling and socialising. I love to get away and spend a lot of my holiday time in the mountains and have a soft spot for the Pyrenees in the summer and the Alps in the winter.

What was your prior experience before becoming Chief Executive of the Consumer Council?

I started my career in IT and Information Management in the private sector. Before joining the Consumer Council, I spent four years as leader of the Armagh and Dungannon Health Action Zone. Here, I was responsible for delivering improvements in public health by engaging the community, public and private sectors to work in partnership.

I am also involved in the International Women's Forum, the Confederation of British Industry, the Institute of Directors, the Institute of Public Health in Ireland and the British and Irish Ombudsman Association.

What are your objectives for your term as Chief Executive and what are the most significant advances made by your department to date?

The Consumer Council is a statutory body and our mission is to make the consumer voice heard

‘It is also very important to me to ensure that the Consumer Council is an organisation of high reputation and impact which is fit for purpose and gives value for money’.

and make it count. My key objective as the Chief Executive is to provide leadership, inspiration and direction and to ensure that we all live up to and demonstrate the Consumer Council’s values in all that we do. Our values are courage, conviction and creativity. It is also very important to me to ensure that the Consumer Council is an organisation of high reputation and impact which is fit for purpose and gives value for money. Over the last three years we have made significant, indeed remarkable advances focusing on empowering consumers, driving for a fair deal, promoting responsible consumer behaviour and protecting the needs of vulnerable consumers.

What effect, in your opinion, have credit unions had on society in Ireland since their inception fifty years ago?

With the huge range of loans, mortgages and savings accounts on offer, managing our money well has become a complex business. A recent research report from the Consumer Council showed that Northern Ireland consumers are the worst in the UK when it comes to money matters.

Credit unions have helped many people to kick start the savings habit essential for planning for big occasions like Christmas, weddings or unexpected household bills. Even saving a few pounds a week has helped keep many families out of debt and free from debt worries. Credit unions are one of only a few sources that offer small loans for people who can find it hard to get credit from other mainstream lenders. By establishing responsible saving and borrowing habits with the credit union, people can get and maintain control of their finances.

What are the key aspects of credit union operations that you are most impressed with?

Partnership

The Consumer Council has a long and successful track record of working in partnership with credit unions to help consumers understand the importance of money and have the skills and confidence to manage and use it wisely.

Increasing social inclusion

The credit unions’ unique position in the community has made a major contribution to the economic,

social and cultural framework of Northern Ireland. Credit unions often depend on voluntary workers who are passionate about offering high-quality services to meet the demands of the 21st Century consumer.

Farepak

In the aftermath of the Farepak collapse, we’re proud that the credit unions stepped up to the mark and answered our call to provide a savings scheme to help people pay for Christmas and help ensure that the scandal of the Farepak collapse never happens again.

Credit unions in schools

Together with the Financial Services Authority, we showcased the very best of credit unions’ work with schools at the Your Money in Your Life conference at Stormont. Local credit unions helped Strandburn Infants School and St Matthews Primary School in East Belfast pioneer savings schemes with pupils as young as four and this model of mini credit unions has since spread to many other schools. The initiative is successful with pupils and helps to promote the credit union concept to parents and guardians. Schools tell us that parents are more likely to join the local credit unions as a result.

How do you think the success of credit unions can be developed and built upon?

More households in Northern Ireland do not have a savings or current account than the rest of the UK¹. Credit unions provide an important alternative to saving and borrowing for people who may not have access to the more traditional financial institutions.

What was the Consumer Council’s view of the collapse of the Farepak Christmas Club in October 2006?

Christmas was effectively cancelled for 1,200 local people who lost nearly £500,000 when Farepak went bust in 2006. Savers and agents were devastated and out of pocket just weeks before Christmas. At the time, we promised to provide practical help and advice and to work with savers, agents and others to come up with safer ways to save. Our report – The Farepak Collapse – NI Savers’ Stories – made

¹ DSDNI: Family Resources Survey 2006

‘My key objective as the Chief Executive is to provide leadership, inspiration and direction and to ensure that we all live up to and demonstrate the Consumer Council’s values in all that we do.’

recommendations to the Government, consumer bodies, banks and building societies to help make sure this scandal is never repeated.

We must learn lessons from the Farepak collapse. This needs a partnership approach with the credit unions and other providers of financial services to help people to be aware of the risks of savings clubs and to develop safe and secure savings schemes. We are delighted that the credit union launched its Easy Shares Account which allows people to save safely for Christmas and other special occasions.

What role do credit unions have to play in providing an alternative to consumers who have previously used home credit/hamper savings markets?

Savers using hamper savings clubs are determined to avoid taking on debt to pay for Christmas and want to know that their money is protected. The Easy Shares Account helps people to save, not borrow for Christmas and other special events. They can save a little or a lot and have the much needed peace of mind that their money is safe.

The Consumer Council recently called for changes in the law to put credit union members in Northern Ireland on an equal footing with their counterparts in the UK. Can you expand on the reasoning behind this move?

We recommended that the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee support a review of the laws governing credit unions in order to allow them to meet the changing needs of consumers and be responsive in a more competitive marketplace.

We asked that the law be changed to let parents open Child Trust Funds (CTFs) in credit unions. The current anomaly that exists whereby parents here cannot open CTFs in credit unions works against developing responsible attitudes to saving and borrowing. Changing the law to address this

would encourage parents and children, especially those families who prefer credit unions to banks and building societies, to access a local community option for investing their CTFs.

Credit unions should be able to take on additional services and offer people access to the range of other basic financial services like personal current accounts, Direct Debits and bill payment through PayPoint. We also want to see groups and societies allowed to become members of the credit union and we want to see a review of the common bond restrictions on credit unions to improve access for consumers.

What changes do credit unions need to make to better meet the needs of credit union members?

Credit unions need to find a balance between trying to attract larger savers and borrowers and maintaining the best of the current service for existing members.

The familiarity of the credit union in a local community can offer some people a less intimidating way of using financial services and products so it is important that volunteers and staff aim for the highest standards of training and professionalism to continually improve standards of confidentiality and respect for members.

There’s scope for credit unions to take on additional services so that consumers have equitable access to the full range of basic financial services including direct payment of social security benefits, personal current accounts, bill payment through PayPoint, direct debits and the facility to pay money into credit union accounts from outside agencies.

Credit unions could enhance their services to help people manage their money and develop their financial capability, for example by signposting members to expert debt advisers if they need help.