

NIIRTAnews

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September/October 2009



***“Planning reform
is my priority” - New
Environment Minister
Edwin Poots MLA writes
exclusively for NIIRTANews***

Phoenix Supply Keeps Cut Prices for Small Business Customers

Phoenix Supply has recently confirmed a 19.0% reduction in its tariffs with these lower rates applying from 1st October 2009. Keeping a promise it made earlier in the year, this price cut for Phoenix Supply customers is due to the continued fall in the wholesale cost of gas.



David Strahan, General Manager of Phoenix Supply

The average gas bill has fallen by £104 annually to give the average Phoenix customer an annual domestic bill of £437, or just £8.40 per week.

David Strahan, General Manager of Phoenix Supply, said: "We made a commitment to our customers in January that should the wholesale cost of gas continue to fall we would, once again, reduce prices accordingly. This is a promise we have kept, and we are delighted that Phoenix is the first major UK gas supplier to be able to announce two substantial price reductions this year."

Mr Strahan continued: "In delivering these reductions, we have consulted formally with the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation (the "Regulator"), the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland and the Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment."

Mr Strahan concluded: "This announcement is a demonstration of our commitment to deliver the lowest possible price to our customers, and clearly shows that natural gas remains excellent value for money compared to other fuels."

NIIRTA Chief Executive Glyn Roberts said: "This is clearly very good news for our members and the wider small business community who are Phoenix Customers and who

will welcome any reduction in their running costs in these difficult recessionary times of reduced cash flows."

"Many business owners have for too long had to put up with severe hikes in their energy bills, making Northern Ireland that bit more expensive for doing business."

Some Facts On Phoenix

- On average, over 220 customers have connected to natural gas each week in the past 10 years. Phoenix Supply Ltd has around 127,000 domestic and industrial and commercial customers.
- Phoenix Supply Ltd is required to complete a period of formal consultation with the Utility Regulator, Consumer Council for Northern Ireland and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment before applying any change in price.
- Over 50% of Phoenix's domestic customer base utilise Pay-As-You-Go (PAYG) meters. The Phoenix Supply PAYG tariff is designed to deliver natural gas at the same cost as the standard credit tariff, unlike Great Britain where, according to Energywatch, prepayment customers are forced to pay up to 31% more for their energy.

For free, independent and impartial energy efficiency advice customers can contact the Energy Saving Trust Advice Centre on 0800 512 012 or on-line at www.est.org.uk/northernireland

New Environment Minister Edwin Poots MLA writes for NIIRTA News

"Planning Reform is my priority"

Reform of the local planning system and reducing the amount of packaging and usage of plastic bags, are two areas high on my agenda as Environment Minister.

In July I launched the consultation paper 'Reform of the Planning System: Your chance to influence change'.

The proposals in the paper lay the foundation for transforming our planning system and cover all aspects of the system, including development plan, development management, planning policy and enforcement. The overall programme aims to contribute to the Executive's objective of improving Northern Ireland's economy, while balancing this with the aims of protecting the built and natural environment, and contributing to sustainable development.

I believe the proposals will help transform our mainly regulatory planning system into a more responsive one which helps to enable appropriate development and manage it in the public's interest. The proposed reforms also give effect to the Review of Public Administration decisions that will result in responsibility for the majority of planning functions being

transferred from my Department to local government in May 2011. It is important that everyone contributes to this debate and I would encourage you to submit your comments before the consultation period ends on 2 October or offer your views at one of the 11 consultation events being held during September.

In relation to packaging I am committed to reducing unnecessary packaging and maximising the recycling of packaging waste. Research shows that consumers believe packaging is an environmental problem and an issue they want government to tackle.

Current packaging policy has delivered a marked increase in recycling – Northern Ireland businesses recovered more than 140 thousand tonnes of packaging last year. Businesses have also reduced the packaging used on a range of products, often in ways which are not noticed by consumers. In 2008 there was zero growth in grocery packaging, despite increases in both sales and population.

This demonstrates a considerable achievement; however we need to do

more. That is why I am pleased to support the UK-wide packaging strategy which was launched in June 2009. The Strategy, "Making the Most of Packaging", sets the proposed direction for packaging policy over the next 10 years. The overall aim is to minimise the environmental impact of packaging, without compromising its ability to protect the product.

I am also encouraged by the ongoing efforts of retailers here to reduce the numbers of single use plastic bags and paper bags. By asking shoppers "do you need a bag?", encouraging them to use their reusable carrier bags and through other initiatives changing our shopping habits, retailers are helping to protect the environment and reduce litter. Together these initiatives are working to bring bag numbers down and I appreciate the efforts of retailers, but I want to see further reductions and will be monitoring this issue.



NIIRTA Annual General Meeting

The ninth Annual General Meeting of the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association will take place on **Wednesday 14th October 2009** in NIIRTA's offices at 261 – 263 Ormeau Road, Belfast at **12.00 noon**.

Light refreshments will be provided after the meeting

If you plan to be there, please let us know in advance:

Lisa Posnett: e-mail admin@niirta.com or telephone 028 9022 0004



Glyn Roberts
NIIRTA CEO with
Lord Mandelson
Secretary of State
for Business and
Skills at the recent
FSB Reception at
the House of
Commons.

Doing the Business for the Environment

Environment Minister Edwin Poots praised the role that local small businesses play in promoting good environmental business practice.

The Minister was speaking after a meeting with the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association.

He said: "I was pleased to learn this week that the number of small businesses in Northern Ireland taking action to improve their energy and water efficiency has doubled in just two years, to a level higher than anywhere else in the UK."

"This is evidence that our local small businesses, many of whom fall within the independent retail sector, continue to act as role models for good environmental business practice."

The meeting with NIIRTA was to discuss a range of issues of mutual interest, with planning reform topping the agenda.

The Minister said: "Northern Ireland

needs a planning system which will enable the Executive to meet its number one priority of growing the economy. I would therefore appeal to our independent retail sector, which is a key component in that economy, to make their voices heard and respond to the current consultation on reform of the local planning system."

Echoing this appeal for businesses to respond to the consultation, NIIRTA Chief Executive Glyn Roberts said: "We had a productive meeting with Minister Poots on planning reform and we look forward to working with the Minister on this and on a range of additional environmental issues in the future."

"We discussed the urgent need for early publication of draft PPS5 and the concern for the future of our town centres. Minister Poots indicated his support for the independent retail sector and I believe we can do business with him."



David McLaughlin NIIRTA vice chair, Paul Stewert NIIRTA President, Minister for Environment Edwin Poots, MLA, Glyn Roberts NIIRTA CEO, Des Stephens, NIIRTA Planning consultant

Independent Retailers Urge More Support for Local Farmers



(From l to r) Jim Quail, Glyn Roberts, Ian Paisley Jnr, Paul Stewart, Rowan Black and Joe Quail.

At a meeting with the new Chairman of the Assembly Agriculture Committee, Ian Paisley Jnr MLA, a senior delegation of food retailers from the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association has called for greater support for local farmers and suppliers.

NIIRTA also voiced its support for the publication of a rural white paper and pledged its support to the DARD Minister. Glyn Roberts, NIIRTA Chief Executive said: "This was a productive meeting with the Chairman and we highlighted the huge contribution that our Wholesale and Retail members make to Northern Ireland's agri-sector and suppliers by sourcing 100% of their meat and poultry from local farmers and suppliers."

"NIIRTA is absolutely committed to ensuring that local farmers get a fair deal for their produce and above all a fair price."

"The multiple supermarkets, despite some progress, still have a long way to go in matching our members' record of support to local farmers and giving them a fair price for their produce."

"We fully support the publication of the rural white paper and the need for a rural champion. A great many of our members trade in rural areas and make an important contribution to those communities."

"We hope to meet with the Agriculture Minister very soon to discuss how our sector can play its part in this process"

Speaking after the meeting Mr. Paisley said, "I firmly believe that one of the primary markets for our food producers must be the local market here at home. Whilst Northern Ireland is only a small region we should be striving to ensure that local food is the first choice for our consumers."

"Whilst Northern Ireland is only a small region we should be striving to ensure that local food is the first choice for our consumers"

Retailers obviously have a part to play in this key goal of ensuring there is an accessible path to the market for our food producers. I was very pleased to meet with some independent retailers and their representatives to discuss this. I want to work with both the larger supermarket multiples as well as the smaller independent traders to help promote our local produce.

"It was very reassuring to hear NIIRTA and its members' support for the Northern Ireland food industry and their commitment to delivering a fair price for all sections of the food-chain."

"The Finance Minister has voiced his support to support improvements in the procurement within the public sector and I am committed to working to develop stronger local markets for our food in this area as well as in the retail and catering sectors. I will be continuing to work over the coming months to ensure that local food is given the prominence it deserves and that the path to market can be as smooth as possible."



Agriculture Minister Michelle Gildernew MP MLA and Glyn Roberts at this year's Sinn Fein Ard Fheis.

Ritchie calls for views on the regeneration of Carrickfergus town centre

Social Development Minister, Margaret Ritchie has called on the people of Carrickfergus to express their views on a new masterplan for Carrickfergus town centre.

The draft plan identifies key town centre sites for redevelopment and regeneration along with the most appropriate form and timing of the works. It will include:

- regenerating the town centre with specific emphasis in the Historic Core, Castle Esplanade, Irish Quarter, Joymount and the Waterfront area;
- strengthening connections between the Irish Quarter and the town centre, incorporating green links and highlighting the gasworks museum;
- a new network of streets from the Joymount area to the Waterfront to boost maritime and leisure activities;
- upgrading the Castle Esplanade area with proposals for a flexible venue for events and activities; and
- connecting the historic core with the Waterfront area whilst highlighting its heritage assets.

Margaret Ritchie said: "This is a great opportunity for the people of Carrickfergus to help shape the future of their town. I am therefore calling on everyone with a vested interest in its future to give their views on the ideas that we have come up with.

"I believe the masterplan provides us with an ambitious yet realistic vision that will make best use of the town's iconic

assets, whilst protecting its ongoing success and prosperity.

"This will be quite a challenge in the current difficult economic climate. However, I am encouraged by the willingness of the private sector to get involved in the process through the Carrickfergus Development Company. I trust that the development opportunities will be taken up in the coming years, thereby increasing the economic vibrancy of the town and helping to promote Carrickfergus' proud heritage."

"This is a great opportunity for the people of Carrickfergus to help shape the future of their town."

Alderman Patricia McKinney, Mayor of Carrickfergus Borough Council said: "I am delighted to launch this consultation. The Carrickfergus masterplan is a celebration of the maritime nature of Carrickfergus. We hope that this consultation gives everyone in the town the opportunity to have their say and I would encourage everyone to give feedback so that the plan can truly contribute to making Carrickfergus a



Social Development Minister, Margaret Ritchie

better place to live, work and visit." Jack Creighton Chairman of Carrickfergus Development Company said: "This plan is a huge opportunity for Carrickfergus to take its rightful place as one of Ireland's most Historic Towns. The business community has spent considerable time and effort over the last number of months contributing to the development of the vision and proposals contained in the plan. The Carrickfergus Development Company believes that this plan offers a unique opportunity to make Carrickfergus an exciting and unique place to shop, live and visit. I would encourage everyone with an interest in Carrickfergus to come and view the proposals and to have their say."

Succession and Business Property – Protect your Wealth

Statistics indicate that around 70% of people die without having made a Will. The consequences of this can cause major difficulties for those family members left behind. These problems can be worse still where the estate of the deceased person includes a family business or business property and it is therefore essential that business owners plan in advance for the continuation of the business after their death and consider the inheritance tax consequences of leaving a business behind them.

The importance of a Will. For business owners, a carefully planned Will is essential to ensure that the business passes intact and viable to those intended to carry it on. If a business owner does not make a Will this can result in the need to sell the business or borrow heavily against it in order to discharge to all family members their respective statutory shares in the estate. A properly drafted Will can help to ensure that such a consequence is avoided.

Where businesses are run as partnerships it is important for each partner to ensure that there is a properly drafted Partnership Agreement in place. Similarly with limited liability companies, there should be an appropriate Shareholders Agreement. These should include the necessary terms to clarify what is to happen to the interest of each Partner or Shareholder if they die whilst still involved with the business. It is also vital to ensure that such Partners

or Shareholders also have Wills in place and that the terms of those Wills do not conflict with the provisions of the Partnership Agreement or Shareholders Agreement.

Inheritance Tax and Business Property Relief. Business Property Relief takes effect by a percentage reduction in the value of 'relevant business property' on death, at the rate of 100% or 50% depending on the nature of the assets transferred, the structure of the ownership of the business and the premises from which it operates. The rules applicable differ between interests in business partnerships and majority and minority shareholdings in limited companies. Careful planning therefore can result in the transfer of a

business and the business premises to the next generation, free of inheritance tax if the necessary conditions are met but advance planning and the correct advice is essential.

These are important considerations for many businesses and involve several related issues. Future articles will deal with these various aspects in greater detail.

Murlands Solicitors advise in relation to tax planning and the drafting of wills. We also offer a full range of commercial services including commercial conveyancing and litigation at competitive rates. Contact us for an initial no obligation discussion and to obtain further details of our services.

This article was contributed by: Murlands Solicitors, Head office: 15 English Street, Downpatrick, Co Down BT30 6AP. Tel 028 44619980

Branch Offices: 33 Church Road, Carryduff, Co. Down. Tel 028 90814344 2, Dromore Street, Ballynahinch, Co. Down Tel 028 97562209

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Green Light On Small Business Rate Relief Scheme

Finance Minister Sammy Wilson has confirmed his commitment to press ahead with a Small Business Rate Relief scheme for Northern Ireland, following a meeting with the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association.

The Minister said: “The policy I am taking forward has been fully endorsed by the Executive and, since its announcement, there has been cross party support and calls from the business community to introduce it at the earliest opportunity.

“I listened carefully today to the Association and recent calls from the Federation of Small Businesses. Both organisations stressed the need to get the necessary legislation passed by the Assembly as a matter of urgency. I will take whatever steps are needed to ensure that the legislation is brought forward and passed as soon as possible”.

The Minister went on to explain that, following Executive approval, the support of the Assembly will be vital in order to deliver the scheme.

He said: “The necessary enabling legislation has been drafted. When the Executive clears it, I will be looking to all parties in the Assembly to give this the green light and drive it through so that the scheme can be delivered in time for next year’s bills - delivering real help to many of our smaller businesses during this downturn”.

“This is particularly important because the scheme cannot be introduced without the legislation in place. If there are any further delays and the Bill is delivered late, the scheme’s provisions cannot be backdated to the beginning of the financial year nor can it be introduced ‘in year’”.

Glyn Roberts, Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association (NIIRTA) said: “The introduction of a Small Business Rate Relief Scheme will be of considerable help to those small retailers and businesses who are struggling to pay their rates bills as the result of the downturn.

“Minister Wilson and his predecessor, Nigel Dodds, deserve considerable credit for bringing the scheme forward which will bring us into line with the rest of the UK.

“This has been a long term policy priority for NIIRTA and we have raised this issue with all of the local political parties, who have indicated their support for the scheme. We now need to see that all Party support when the Assembly considers the legislation.”

Subpostmasters call for vital support for post offices at special Assembly debate

Senior figures from the Northern Ireland Assembly and local government discussed how to safeguard the future of Northern Ireland’s post offices at a special debate organised by the National Federation of SubPostmasters (NFSP).

Minister for Finance and Personnel Sammy Wilson MLA, together with Assembly representatives from the DUP, Sinn Féin, UUP, SDLP, Alliance and Greens all recently all took part in ‘The Post Office Debate’ at the Parliament Buildings, Stormont.

The meeting addressed how local and devolved government, and other stakeholders in Northern Ireland, can support the post office network to ensure that it has a sustainable and vibrant future.

On the agenda for the event was the need for post offices to continue to provide local access to government, banking, mail and other vital services to individuals and small businesses across Northern Ireland; and for all levels of government to make full use of the post office network’s unrivalled geographical reach and high levels of public trust.

The event comes as the Northern Ireland Executive prepares to put legislation before the Assembly on its proposals for a Small Business Rate Relief Scheme. The introduction of the scheme would bring Northern Ireland in line with the rest of the UK in providing vital rates relief for post offices and other small businesses.

George Thomson NFSP General Secretary said: “Despite recent post office closures and the promise of new work, the post office network remains at risk. The network can once again be a thriving resource for communities across Northern Ireland and the whole of the UK, but only if local and devolved government provide tangible new work for the public to access at the Post Office.

“This debate is therefore an important opportunity for us to highlight how the Northern Ireland Assembly and councils across Northern Ireland can provide the crucial support needed.”

NFSP Executive Officer for Northern Ireland Stephen Harper said: “We know by talking to subpostmasters across Northern Ireland that while post offices remain an essential resource for the public and for small businesses, subpostmasters are still struggling to make ends meet.

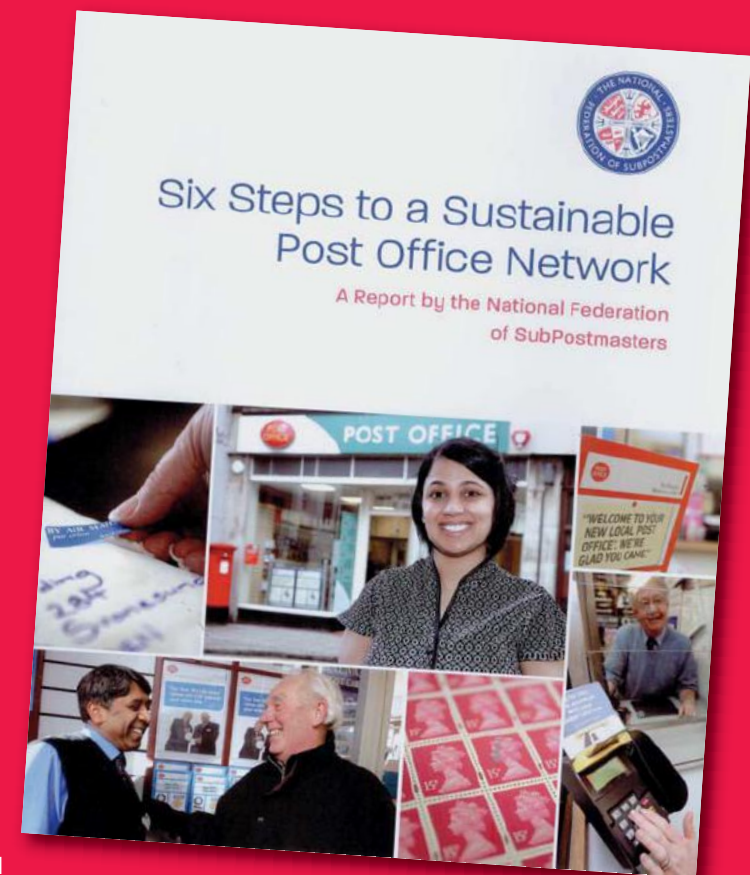
Mr Harper, who is also the subpostmaster at Dungiven Post Office, continued: “The Northern Ireland Executive’s proposal to introduce small business rates relief for post offices is welcome, but it is vital that the Assembly and local authorities hear how post offices can be helped to survive through new locally-driven work and services. We welcome this event as a golden opportunity to work towards that goal.”

The Post Office Debate follows the launch of the NFSP’s Six Steps to a Sustainable Post Office Network report at the House of Commons earlier this year.

The debate will be part of a series of events across the UK’s nations and regions exploring with key stakeholders how local post offices can be sustained.

Glyn Roberts, NIIRTA Chief Executive who attended the event said:

“As an organisation which has many members who run



post officers, we fully support the Six Steps report and would urge all political parties to sign up to it”

“We look forward to working with the NFSP to see its report’s conclusions full adopted by the NI Executive

The NFSP’s Six Steps to a Sustainable Post Office Network identifies a six-step action plan, detailed below:

- **Central government services** – to increase the number of services available at the Post Office, to introduce a face to face service for all aspects of Government services, to equally promote access to services at the Post Office, and to create a joined-up approach across Government departments.
- **Devolved and local government** – to ensure local governments use the Post Office to deliver a wide range of local services, to move away from local authority ownership of local post offices which the NFSP believes is not viable, and to call for devolved governments to provide rates relief and grant funding for post offices.
- **Banking and financial services** – to urgently commit to the setting up of a Postbank at the Post Office (the report examines successful state-run postbanks in Europe), to increase the functionality of the Post Office card account (POCA), to allow full access to all UK high street bank accounts at the Post Office, and to create a comprehensive range of bill payment services.
- **Mail** – to ensure Post Offices remain the hub for all social and business mail needs, to create opportunities for post offices to offer new mail services, and to protect 900 mailwork offices threatened by potential Royal Mail sorting and delivery office closures.
- **Network size and support** – to ensure there are no more post office closures, to maintain the existing network through more work for subpostmasters, for Government to commit to review its funding of the network and for central, devolved and local government to provide rates relief and grant aid.
- **Local retail** – to improve the viability of independent local retailers as post offices and their retail outlets are inter-dependent, to tackle the growth in crime against retail businesses and to change planning law to help support local high streets.

Local Traders Confident After Tesco PAC Hearing



Glyn Roberts NIIRTA CEO with local traders

In a joint statement following the conclusion of the PAC Hearing into the Tesco Bridgewater Park Application, the Banbridge Chamber of Commerce and the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association were confident that the DOE Ministers decision to reject the out of town hypermarket will be upheld.

Roisin McAleenan President of the Banbridge Chamber and Glyn Roberts, NIIRTA Chief Executive said in a joint statement:

"Despite the huge resources and top level QC's that Tesco and the developer used against us in the hearing, we are very confident that the DOE Ministers decision to reject the out of town hypermarket will be upheld by the PAC"

"The PAC heard very clearly about the retail devastation this out of town hypermarket would cause in terms of a net loss of hundreds of jobs and the closure of dozens of small retailers in Banbridge Town Centre"

"From start to finish this has been a David v Goliath battle with a small group of traders taking on the largest retailer and the largest property developer in the UK"

"Unlike Tesco and the Developer, we could not afford to employ any QCs, Barristers or a huge team of advisors. But despite this we still got our message across"

"Tesco in their statement say that they have the overwhelming support of the local community. This is just plain wrong. Over 3000 people signed our petition without being offered vouchers or anything else-how do they explain this?"

"Closing Banbridge Town Centre is not worth £200 in vouchers"

"They also say that local small businesses are in favour of this application-we would challenge Tesco to name them?"

"This has been a long hard fight for local traders but we feel that it is worth it to save Banbridge Town Centre"

The decision regarding the appeal will be heard in October

Traders Meet Police Commander on ATM Robberies

"The business community have voiced a sense of frustration about police response in some parts of the District. I told members of the local business community that as police, we also have a sense of frustration."

The police F District Commander, Chief Superintendent Michael Skuce, has met with members of the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association to discuss the impact of crime on the business community and opportunities for improving understanding, confidence and partnership working between the Police Service and local businesses.

Speaking after the meeting, Chief Superintendent Skuce said: "The meeting was a good opportunity for local police and local business representatives to get a better understanding of the challenges we all face."

"It is a difficult time for businesses everywhere. At a time of economic uncertainty, ensuring continued growth requires confidence and innovative thinking. Police in F District are committed to supporting the hard work and dedication of local business as they embark on this journey."

"Local police officers, from neighbourhood constable to District Commander have a simple objective – to make the District a safer place for local people and for local businesses. That is the job that we signed up to do."

"Unfortunately, achieving that objective is neither simple nor straightforward. The business community have voiced a sense of frustration about police response in some parts of the District. I told members of the local business community that as police, we also have a sense of frustration. Continued service delivery must be mindful of the current security

situation. But, I and my officers are determined to continue serving the community here and by working in partnership, local police, together with the local people and local businesses help ensure that crime is prevented and that those who choose to break the law are brought to justice."

Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association, Mr Glyn Roberts, said:

"This was a positive meeting which allowed retailers to express their concerns about retail crime and in particular the recent ATM robberies from shops in the area."

"Many rural communities value having ATM machines in our members stores and given that it generates footfall and provides a community service, we are concerned that continued robberies like this will deter banks from installing further ATM machines across Northern Ireland"

"Retailers and the Police must work together in an effective partnership if we are to tackle Business Crime".



From left: Glyn Roberts, Michael Skuce, Peter McBride, NIIRTA board member and Omagh Trader.

NIIRTA

Benefits of Membership

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What can NIIRTA do for you?

NIIRTA can provide retailers with advice on a whole range of issues – from rates reductions and car parking to crime prevention and legislation information.

Here's a list of what's on offer from NIIRTA...

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HCMA – a sickness and injury scheme similar to BUPA – contact NIIRTA for details or telephone 01423 866985 (and quote NIIRTA).

Willis Insurance – Property insurance at competitive rates – Contact NIIRTA or Ian McClure at Willis Insurance – 028 9089 5068 and mobile 07961 453303

Vehicle Leasing – Fleet Financial are offering members vehicle leasing with 18 per cent discount – contact Fleet Financial or NIIRTA

XACT – Health & Safety/Food Management System available at competitive rates – 'No Obligation' audit facility available to NIIRTA members. Contact Xact on 0845 665 3006.

Review of business rates needed - Town states its case for traders

Lurgan's traders need a review of the rates to help them beat the recession, the new chairman of the Assembly's Social Development Committee has been told.

Simon Hamilton was in town last week on a fact finding tour and met with representatives from Lurgan Forward. The president of the Northern Ireland Independent Trade Retail Association, Glyn Roberts, also attended.

They told Mr Hamilton the town's business rates were based on valuations conducted almost ten years ago, in a very different economic climate.

A Lurgan Forward spokesman said: "The focus of the meeting was regeneration, it was clearly pointed out commercial and community regeneration go hand in hand."

"In many ways Lurgan has been left behind over the years both in housing and commercial needs."

Infrastructure issues were also raised, such as the continuation of Millennium Way, traffic flow in the town centre and railway issues which need to be 'addressed for the greater good of the commercial and local community'.

The conservation area, which has in many ways been useful in retaining the heritage of the town, he said, has in its interpretation been restrictive to development and rejuvenation of the town.

"It was pointed out a degree of common sense is required to make things happen," he said.

A number of projects have been long delayed because of the policy - work at the Methodist Church on High Street and the old Connor Chemist were among the examples.

The issue of commercial rates was raised and the figures arrived at ten years ago were described as 'inaccurate and unfair'.

"We asked for a sense of urgency in getting a new rates valuation probably critical for many towns similar to Lurgan."

Money from the DSD is being released for public realm works in the town centre at Market Street, there was also a call for the scheme to be extended to High Street, which the spokesman described as 'the most vibrant part of independent retail in the town'.



Pic courtesy of Lurgan Mail - Glyn Roberts NIIRTA CEO, Simon Hamilton MLA Chair of Assembly Social Development Committee and Charlie Gardener from Lurgan Forwards looking at a map of Lurgan town centre.

He went on: "We pointed out while the economic climate is tight, the occupancy rate in the town is quite high and the number of new business starts have arrived in recent months, which would show the town is worth investing in."

"It was pointed out that a £100 million plus development was lost by the town in light of planners designating the regional shopping centre of Rushmere a town centre and increasing the boundary to allow expansion, which is seriously detrimental to retail within the borough."

While accepting market forces apply, it was emphasised that Lurgan should be given the opportunity with planning policies to rejuvenate itself as a town centre fit for use by the local community.

Speaking after the meeting Mr Hamilton said he was very pleased to have had the opportunity to visit the town and to see first hand the efforts being made to rejuvenate the town.

He added: "We need to do all we can to encourage development and support our town centres."

Glyn Roberts of NIIRTA said: "We are very supportive of the work Lurgan Forward is doing, Lurgan has many challenges but many opportunities. We need proper planning policies to allow town centres to grow."

Bangor and Holywood town centres face up to challenging times

Town Centre Manager for Bangor and Holywood, Stephen Dunlop gives an update on his areas

There is little doubt that Northern Ireland is experiencing the full effects of the credit crunch and North Down is no different. Exactly how much trade has been hit is very difficult to calculate as no consistent figures are collated and compared. This is a big weakness when directing a regeneration programme but one that the Association of Town Centre Management (ATCM) is seeking to resolve.

The Department for Social Development (DSD) carries responsibility for urban regeneration in Northern Ireland and their programme to date has been piecemeal, sporadic and only recently been targeting areas of social deprivation (TSN) and derelict town centre streetscapes. This has seriously compromised the strategies and aspirations of many of the 20 Town Centre Managers spread around NI. All of NI's town centre managers share the same shopping list; a focused DSD strategy to enhance town centres, a revised DRD PPS5 and an Assembly working for the common interest of all citizens in NI.

Despite the inherent weaknesses in our governance both Bangor and Holywood are proactively planning their futures and both have significant retail lead regeneration schemes. A proactive council with a vision beyond the reorganisation of public administration (RPA) has been working on a regeneration strategy for a number of years. Part of their commitment has been the funding of a town centre management imitative since early 2002.

In Bangor the key seafront development opportunity, Queens Parade, has a potential "lead developer" in the form of Karl Greenfarm, a NI based consortium. Their proposal for £100m worth of mixed development including retail (targeting a critical mass of independents to establish its key selling point!), office, leisure and residential use, is proving very popular with many residents. DSD and North Down Borough Council are supporting the scheme with a current start date of late-2010

To many citizens, definitions such as "social deprivation", would not have assumed to include Bangor, sitting at the eastern end of the "gold coast". Now based on Govt. statistics, Bangor's seafront Harbour Ward is eligible for significant DSD support. This has given local politicians and the town centre management partnership the opportunity to challenge Govt. for support and created a boost in private sector investment despite the recession.

Bangor's first step on the regeneration path will be in the form of a detailed traffic study followed by the development of a Masterplan for Bangor. The first defining the possible parameters that will help shape the latter. It will be the responsibility of the town centre manager to make

sure that the consultants make the Masterplan relevant and achievable. It must target the underlying weaknesses within the town centre and build on the town centres strengths.

The future for Holywood will always be in the strength of its independent speciality shopping mix. With a high-income catchment area the town centre is almost recession proof. Whilst UK vacancy rates average 12%, Holywood is consistently around 8%. Demand for retail space is constant and when "The front" is developed it will add an extra 18 medium-sized units in a pedestrianised square setting. The marketing strategy will target speciality retailers who will add distinction to Holywood.

One of the great strengths that NI seeks to retain is its traditional independent retail sector and here again Bangor and Holywood are proud to shout about their variety of quality speciality shops. This is very relevant to Bangor where the annual Bangor Business Awards consistently see the independent sector win over multiples in a whole range of categories. 12 out of 15 awards were won by independent businesses. This year the gala dinner was attended by First Minister Peter Robinson MP MLA who spoke highly of the need for such a strong independent presence within a balanced economy.



Ald. Leslie Cree MLA, First Minister Peter Robinson MP MLA, Evan Ward Bangor Chamber of Commerce and Stephen Dunlop Town Centre Manager for Bangor and Holywood

The awards are managed by the town centre management team in partnership with the Bangor Chamber of Commerce and have become the premier social event in North Down's business calendar.

We need the Regulator to work with Phoenix to put a switching system in place which will allow businesses to take advantage of lower prices and improvements to customer service which competition can bring. These switching systems are not only important to offer businesses a choice of gas supplier but they will allow suppliers such as firmus energy to offer dual fuel deals, for gas and electricity, which can save customers even more money and make the management of their energy requirements even easier.

Glyn Roberts, Chief Executive of NIIRTA said, "We welcome the price reductions in the towns where firmus energy is supplying gas. However, we are aware that many more of our members could benefit from the competition which firmus is attempting to bring to gas users in Greater Belfast. In the rest of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, businesses can change their gas supplier as easily as changing their mobile phone provider but this is currently impossible in the Greater Belfast gas market."

The current switching systems, which only allow for a small number of businesses to switch per week are a barrier to competition and are preventing businesses from taking advantage of firmus' lower prices. This needs to change, and quickly, to help thousands of small businesses reduce their energy costs, particularly at this difficult economic time.

Energy prices are something that affects everyone – no matter how large or small the organisation and each of you has an opportunity to influence this important issue.

We need to keep this issue high on our politician's agendas so why not write to your local MLA or councillor and ask them to look at why you are not enjoying the benefits of competition on a large scale in the Belfast gas market when it is clear that there are other suppliers ready, willing and most importantly able to enter this arena.

Future of High Streets can't be Left to Chance: BRC Publishes High Street Rescue Plan

A bright, post-recession future is possible for UK high streets but they need to be actively planned, managed and nurtured if it is to be achieved.

A new British Retail Consortium (BRC) report recently published shows the impact recession is having on town centre retailing - twelve per cent of town centre shops are now vacant, three times more than last autumn - but it also demonstrates that many of our high streets have been struggling for years.

High streets are at the heart of our communities and need to evolve as society changes but retailing will always be a fundamental part of successful town centres. It is clear that in many places, recession is accelerating a trend of decline that was already underway.

Alex Gourlay Chief Executive of the Health & Beauty Division, Alliance Boots: "With a branch of Boots on almost every high street across the UK, we are acutely aware of the vital importance of ensuring the long term vitality of our town centres. They help to define the nature of the communities which they serve, where people not only shop but also where they live, work and access essential services.

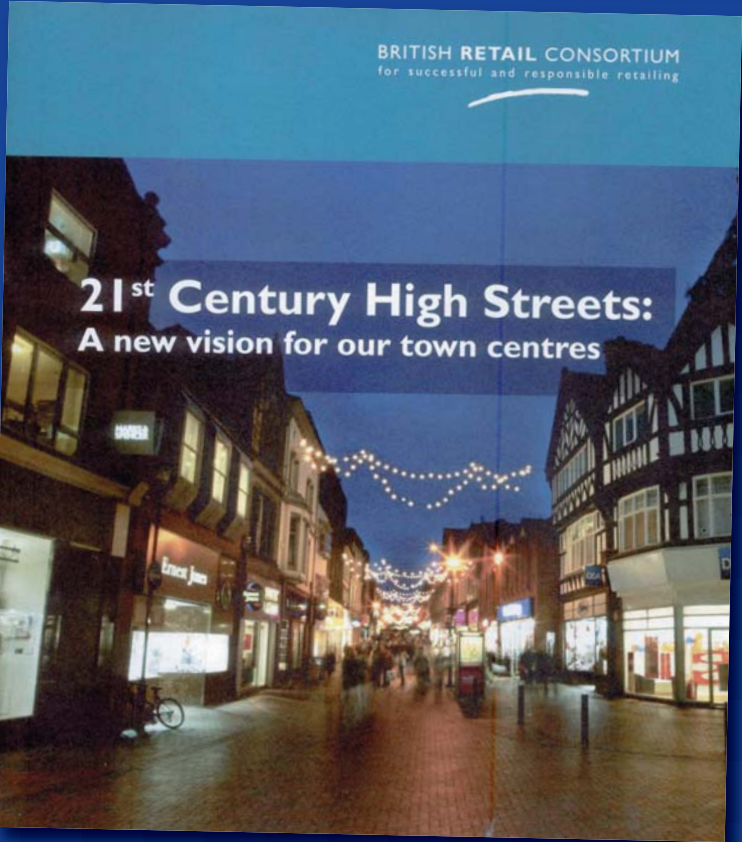
"Clearly these are challenging times for many UK high streets. We support the BRC report which, if delivered, will maintain and strengthen high streets' vitality and viability, ensuring they have a bright and prosperous future. We commend it to all those with a stake in the future of UK town centres."

Glyn Roberts, NIIRTA Chief Executive said: "This is an excellent report which contains many sound policy priorities which NIIRTA would support."

"Our long held view is that retailers large and small, independent and multiple are central to the mix that makes up town centre regeneration."

The BRC's report 21st Century High Streets: A new vision for our town centres sets out a twenty-point plan for securing the long-term future of town centre retailing well beyond the end of this recession. Key recommendations include:

- **Economic health** - Curing ill health is easier than reviving the dead. There should be a careful programme of economic health monitoring, especially for town centres approaching 'tipping points'.
- **Public spaces** – Town centres need good design, making the most of heritage features or natural surroundings to create a unique sense of place. Then they must be very well maintained.
- **Crime** - Real priority must be given to deterring all forms of retail crime and anti-social behaviour. To prevent a



- downward spiral, damaged property must be restored quickly.
- **Costs** – High streets need central Government backing. There must be no new property and business rate burdens and a responsible and inclusive approach from local authorities to the money they raise and spend.
 - **Access** – Parking and transport policy should be directed at providing a service to customers and retailers, not exploited as a local authority fund raiser.

Stephen Robertson British Retail Consortium Director General said: "High streets are the heart of local communities and economies – providing jobs and essential services. They are a crucial part of our national retail mix but many of them are in trouble, facing difficulties that began well before the current recession.

"Some will flourish again as the economy recovers; others have to shape a different future as customers' needs change. But that cannot be left to chance. These processes have to be actively managed by local authorities with their retailers, other businesses and residents."

The BRC report includes 20 case studies of initiatives aimed at delivering great environments in which to trade and shop.

For example Chester addressed declining afternoon footfall by making some car parks 'Free after 3.00', Swansea runs an annual Independents' Day to boost independent traders, Huddersfield Town Centre Partnership has its own magazine, Dundee stages its own retail awards and Belfast is spending £28 million on upgrading the city centre shopping area.

The full report can be downloaded from the following webpage: www.brc.org.uk/highstreets.

GAS COMPETITION SET TO SAVE BUSINESS EVEN MORE MONEY

By Neil Holland, Head of Sales & Marketing, firmus energy

There has been good news on the energy front recently with firmus energy, Phoenix and NIE all announcing price reductions. While we know these are very welcome in the current trading climate, we believe businesses are losing out in terms of even better savings and improvements in customer service through increased competition, particularly in the Belfast gas market.

More than three years after the official 'opening' of the natural gas market in greater Belfast, there appears on the surface to be little movement on the competition front. And as businesses know all too well, low energy prices are vital to help them compete with their counterparts in the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

Firmus energy, which currently supplies natural gas to ten major towns and cities across Northern Ireland, has also been supplying gas to larger industrial and commercial customers in Greater Belfast for the last two years. More importantly for NIIRTA members, we have recently introduced a new deal for small businesses, offering up to 7.5% discount off Phoenix's recently reduced tariff, as well as customer service improvements including online billing and payments.

However, although we are offering the equivalent of one month's free gas off Phoenix's newly reduced tariff, we are unable to offer these savings to ALL businesses immediately due to the lack of switching systems in Phoenix.

Thirteen years after Phoenix first brought gas to Greater Belfast, they cannot facilitate any more than 25 customer switches per week.

To put this in context – if just 10% of gas customers wanted to switch suppliers, it would take Phoenix more than 9 years to process them and allow customers to move suppliers.

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