



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Enterprise, Trade and
Investment

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Impact of Ulster Bank Systems Failure on
Businesses and Consumers: Consumer
Council

5 July 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Phil Flanagan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Steven Agnew
Mr Gordon Dunne
Mr Paul Frew
Mr Patsy McGlone
Mr Stephen Moutray
Mr Robin Newton
Mrs Sandra Overend

Witnesses:

Ms Joleen Cunningham	Consumer Council
Ms Antoinette McKeown	Consumer Council

In attendance:

Mr Beggs	MLA - East Antrim
Mr McKay	MLA - North Antrim
Mr Cree	MLA - North Down
Mr Girvan	MLA - South Antrim

The Deputy Chairperson: Briefing the Committee today are Antionette McKeown, the chief executive of the Consumer Council, and Joleen Cunningham, the interim head of money affairs. You are both very welcome. Can I ask you to make a brief presentation or an opening statement? We will then ask you some questions.

Ms Antoinette McKeown (Consumer Council): Thank you for an opportunity to come here today. We very much welcome the scrutiny Committee's focus on Ulster Bank this morning. I have to say that we have learned more in the past hour and a half than we have learned in 15 days of engagement with Ulster Bank. I mean that sincerely. It demonstrates that democracy does and is working in Stormont. I thank you for that.

We also welcome the very clear date of 16 July from Ulster Bank. I am not sure whether it is the week of 16 July or 16 July, but we welcome that date, although we have some questions about what is informing it. There are still many areas and issues that are unclear, even after this morning.

Before I present some of the areas in which we have been disappointed, I want to say that we have had a very good working relationship with Ulster Bank. It is a member of the Financial Capability Partnership, which the Consumer Council established and leads. It has played a role that has really

enriched that work. I have sat on a judging panel to give financial capability awards to schools across Northern Ireland from the Ulster Bank. I want to put that on record. I also want to put on record, as you have done this morning, the quality and commitment of front line staff who have worked for 15 days straight and who do have a family life as well. We have heard some fantastic stories about how kind and patient they have been in the face of very challenging circumstances.

Our brief sets out the timeline and some of the issues that we have dealt with. We have all been witnesses to the sheer misery and distress the situation has caused so many customers of Ulster Bank and customers of other banks. We are still hearing of customers who are having difficulty accessing their money, despite what we are hearing from the Ulster Bank, and many members have given very clear examples of that this morning.

I move now to the five key issues on which we have been disappointed. We have moved from being disappointed to being frustrated. They are issues of communication, information, consistency, leadership and planning.

In relation to communication, there has been a lack of sufficient and correct information. We heard this morning that there were more complex and difficult issues surrounding Ulster Bank's technical system, and we still do not know why. As Mr Moutray said, there was a lack of media spokespersons at the start of the crisis and it was incredibly difficult to get leadership from the Ulster Bank to come out and reassure its customers. The Consumer Council had to go out and attempt to do that in the absence of Ulster Bank doing it. Information communication between Ulster Bank and the Consumer Council could have been better throughout the past 15 days.

We had major concerns about the supply, quality and frequency of the information that was provided to some consumers via the website and call centre. We have been and are particularly concerned about basic bank account holders, many of whom do not have financial capability skills or necessarily have numeracy and literacy skills, do not have access to websites and do not have access to credit, which has been particularly harrowing for them.

At times, the information put out about the numbers of branches that were open was misleading. We worked really, really hard to get information about what related to Northern Ireland, what related to the Republic of Ireland and what related to the island of Ireland. At times, we were seeing on a Northern Ireland website that there were 90 branches open across Northern Ireland when, in fact, there were only 28. Having asked Ulster Bank repeatedly to put the correct information on the website, we ended up having to go out with advice on our website and through the media to the public to say what was available.

I heard Mr Cruise refer this morning to comments that the Consumer Council has made publicly. I understand that the Consumer Council's role as a statutory representative does not always sit comfortably with people, but we have a very strong track record of working with utility companies and others, including banks, to support them behind the scenes so that we are getting the right information. We have not been getting the information that we have asked for. We have endeavoured to get it. I am sitting here today and will make no apologies if the Consumer Council, as a statutory representative, has a different view as to how Ulster Bank is handling this situation.

In terms of consistency, expectations have been continually raised and dashed. You have mentioned that today. Timetables have shifted and there have been changes to information, which has led to further obstacles for consumers. There has been a lack of consistency right across branches in Northern Ireland and we have continually asked Ulster Bank to have consistent information and accessibility. We recognise that bank managers will need to apply some discretion, but it seems that they have total discretion when it comes to deciding on amounts of money to be given to consumers.

The Consumer Council has asked for clear guidance to be issued to branch managers and customers, but we are not clear that that has happened so far. We had heard consistently that this was a technical issue and that there were additional complex technical difficulties in Ulster Bank. We heard that this morning, but we also heard that it was a backlog issue and that the technical difficulties were solved very, very quickly. It is our understanding that it was day 10 last Friday before we were told that the technical difficulties had been identified. So, I am sitting here today really not clear about whether it is a backlog issue or a technical issue, because I think contradictory evidence has been provided this morning.

We also know — Ulster Bank customers have told us — that they have tried to leave the bank, but have not been able to because they cannot access their accounts. Northern Bank confirmed this

morning that it is opening new accounts for existing Ulster Bank customers, although that is proving difficult. We heard this morning that we still do not know the cause. We are seriously concerned that if you do not know the cause you cannot fix the problem. Those are just some of the consistency issues that we wanted to respond to this morning.

In terms of leadership, undoubtedly customers and consumers feel let down by this crisis. We believe that it was a lack of leadership that turned what we understand are technical difficulties — and they do happen — into a crisis. But it has been the lack of response and the lack of leadership that has led to the chaos that we have seen over the past 15 days. We believe that RBS and Ulster Bank should have done more to regularise accounts more quickly.

There has been a lack of strong leadership from the Ulster Bank, which is in stark contrast to what we have seen from front line staff. We have a view that RBS has been calling the shots and that Ulster Bank has had to wait in line until RBS was ready to deal with it. We are concerned that, in the 15 days since this has happened, not one Ulster Bank leader has had the ability to provide technical information to customers and stakeholders in a meaningful way. We believe that that should be possible.

In terms of planning, you have already touched this morning on the point that a lack of planning and poor response has escalated the situation. We believe that there has been a lack of a back-up system. We do not believe that Ulster Bank or RBS were prepared for the eventuality. When it happened, there was a lack of continuity and contingency planning. I think Mr Newton raised the issue of ongoing contingency planning. We knew it was not going to be solved for payday, but no additional responses were put in to deal with that.

We know that the holiday period is coming up, and there has not been an ongoing response as issues emerge. We have spoken with many businesses who say that they are getting a reaction from the Ulster Bank as they present problems, but there is no contingency plan for realising that, if this business is encountering this problem, then others will be encountering that problem as well. Something needs to be put in place, and they are not putting it in place, particularly to deal with issues around the conversion of euro to sterling. The bank has only just this morning been able to confirm that there has been a problem since 19 June, so it has been particularly difficult.

Finally, in relation to resources, we recognise that Ulster Bank staff have been working consistently over the past 15 days. We recognise that commitment, but we have no idea and we have asked about the number of staff that are processing the batches of payments. We heard this morning that 100 additional staff have been brought in over the past week, some in the last week, some in the last number of days. We simply do not know whether of that 100 staff, there are 70 in the South and 30 in the North. Also, we do not know whether the statistics given today are island of Ireland statistics. We have been getting island of Ireland statistics and we have asked for Northern Ireland statistics, but we do not have them.

The Consumer Council has put a fact sheet on our website that we update daily, and thousands of consumers have used it. We have sought to inform, advise and reassure consumers, and the best way we have of doing that is the media. We have had daily and sometimes hourly contact with the Ulster Bank. We have managed to get a media spokesperson out from the Ulster Bank, and we were relieved to see that. We asked for more branches to be opened later and for longer, and we got that, so it has responded. We have opened our own helplines to basic account holders who do not have the financial capability or skills or access to credit. We have been in touch with utility companies because we had heard that there were difficulties with direct debits and we did not want people to be cut off. We have been in both phone and written contact with utility companies to make sure that that does not happen. We have been in touch with the Financial Services Authority (FSA) on a continuous basis in relation to getting the FSA to bring its authority and power to bear, and we have been talking to the UK Payments Council so that it can intervene. In fact, we a member of staff with the UK Payments Council today updating it on issues in Northern Ireland. Some of you will know, as you are followers, that we have also used our Twitter, Facebook and other social media to keep as much information going as possible.

We are still making very clear demands of Ulster Bank and we are meeting them again this afternoon. We want to see a clear plan established and executed to bring customer accounts up to date. We still believe, on the basis of the evidence given today, that Ulster Bank's senior management is not recognising some of the distress that is out there that we are hearing about, and we are concerned about that.

We want Ulster Bank and RBS to make clear the extent of the resources being put in place locally in Northern Ireland and the extent of the resources being drafted in from GB to bring the situation back to normal. We have to hear from Ulster Bank how it intends to keep customers informed and to resolve any of the resulting charges on their accounts. We keep hearing that people will not be out of pocket, but we cannot underestimate the huge challenge of restoration of overdraft credit charges, non-payment of direct debits, standing orders, the credit ratings of small businesses and the euro/sterling conversion rates of small businesses. We also want Ulster Bank to be clear about what branch opening arrangements are being put in place, which we did not hear this morning.

We know that you know that the effects have been drastic. Our immediate focus is on getting customers access to their own money and to information in the interim to reassure them, and to intervene if they call us to say that they cannot get money and are in dire straits. But, when this is over, we are making an absolute plea to this Committee and the Finance and Personnel Committee to push for better regulation of banks. There is a massive piece of work ongoing in Whitehall and we are closely engaged in it in relation to a review of banking and the establishment of new regulatory organisations. The Consumer Council has called for an organisation that has much stronger consumer interests than the FSA has had. We have the financial conduct authority coming into place this year, which has a very clear and stated intention to focus on customers first. It is absolutely vital that, although it is a reserved matter, we have seen how poor regulation or not sufficiently scrutinised regulation has had an impact on Northern Ireland customers, so we ask you to stay close to that, and we are happy to provide a briefing on it. Joleen and I are happy to answer any questions.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you very much for that; it was very useful. There is a saying that every cloud has a silver lining, and I think your assertion that democracy is working at Stormont is certainly one of those. I look forward to seeing that in your annual report for next year. *[Laughter.]* First, I commend the leadership of the Consumer Council, because you have played a particularly strong role during this crisis in filling the gap of information that has been left by Ulster Bank. The amount of coverage that the Consumer Council has managed to get in providing clear information to consumers outlines how bad that gap was, so we commend you for that and thank you for the role that you are playing in being a voice and advocate for the consumer.

You have made some reference to the 45 tweets that you have put out and how they have been retweeted. The Ulster Bank actually created a Twitter account a very short time ago, and it now has 1,800 followers, which is more than you have and more than I have, and we have been at it a long time. It just shows you how eager people are to try to get information from Ulster Bank. Do you know, off the top of your head, whether Ulster Bank retweeted any of your tweets?

Ms McKeown: No.

The Deputy Chairperson: You have never looked?

Ms McKeown: They have not.

The Deputy Chairperson: Are they following you?

Ms McKeown: I think they probably are.

The Deputy Chairperson: Turning back to what the Ulster Bank said this morning, you alluded to the fact that you have learnt more in an hour than you have in the last two and a half weeks. In all that they said, have you been reassured by anything?

Ms McKeown: I think we still have many outstanding questions. We are looking forward to a fairly frank meeting this afternoon with Ulster Bank so that we can ask some of the questions that we have put to them. We have put about 30 questions to them over the last two weeks. They have provided us with answers, but they have sometimes been answers that actually lead to more questions. As I said, we have a very strong track record of working closely with companies to support them when things go wrong, but we can only support them on the basis of the information that we have, and we have not been able to provide the support that perhaps we could have if the information had been more forthcoming.

The Deputy Chairperson: One of the problems of being the voice of the consumer or filling the gap of information that is there is that you will then be inundated with requests or complaints from consumers

who are now coming to you because they cannot access information from the Ulster Bank. Do you have any indication of how many people have tried to contact the Consumer Council over that?

Ms McKeown: We have put a lot of effort into signposting people back to the Ulster Bank's helpline. We know that we have had a considerable amount of hits on our website for the fact sheet that we have put up informing people of their rights. As I said, we have offered support to basic bank account holders who, despite what Ulster Bank is saying publicly, are coming back to us and saying that they cannot get access to their cash. We have directly intervened with Ulster Bank and other banks to get access to that money. We will continue to signpost the Financial Ombudsman's Service, because that is the statutory complaint-handling body. We are happy to work with it, but we want it to do its job and we want to facilitate people accessing it.

Mr Dunne: Thank you for the work that you have been doing; we appreciate it. As the Deputy Chairperson said, you have filled the information gap.

From what you heard today — I think you found it quite informative — how do you think the senior management of Ulster Bank have handled the crisis? Are you shocked to learn how little interest they have, it seems to me, in real risk management, and how they are managing risk in banking? To me, banking is, in large part, about managing of risk, and they do not seem to get it.

Their management of their IT system is paramount, and they should have a proper risk register and a proper system in place. I certainly got no confidence today to say that they are managing it effectively. There has been a major breakdown, and we are shocked at their incompetence and at how they have managed their system.

Ms McKeown: It is fair to say that, in the wake of the banking crisis of 2008, we have all been having to respond since we heard that risk management was now a number one priority for banks. We know, for example, that the banks have to submit quarterly risk registers. We believe that the governance framework needs to be robust enough so that, if they are handling data pertaining to customers' money, they would have a back-up system that would kick in within four hours, six hours or eight hours, and that when that did not happen they would have a business continuity plan in place alongside a major incident plan.

That is what we are used to with the companies that we deal with. We work with companies to improve their business continuity and major incident plans. If they were in place in this instance, they have not been fit for purpose; you know that as well as we do. Those are some of the issues and questions that we will put to the FSA and ask it to investigate. Right now, however, we really want to focus on our priority, which is the consumers and getting them access to their money.

We will submit a report and put out a call for evidence when we get people's accounts restored.

Mr Dunne: OK. How is the bank going to resolve issues around overcharging on overdrawn accounts? Is it going to be reactive or proactive?

Ms McKeown: I cannot say what Ulster Bank is going to do. I can tell you what we have asked it to do. We have insisted on a fundamental review of every single bank account so that every interest charge, surcharge and charge for the return of an unpaid direct debit is proactively restored to people's accounts. If the bank just leaves it to individuals, it will cause a considerable amount of distress.

We also know that people in Northern Ireland have the lowest level of financial capability in the United Kingdom. Some people will not be able to do that, and it is always the poorest who are hardest hit. That is another issue that we have been raising consistently with them, but let us get the accounts restored. We will continue to monitor that and make that demand.

Mr Dunne: That is great. Thank you.

Ms Joleen Cunningham (Consumer Council): I will just add to that, Mr Dunne. Through our engagement with the Payments Council we know that it is working with other banks and building societies to try to get agreement on how consumers can get refunds and compensation from their banks and on how the banks can work out the processes for managing that. Once we have further detail on that we will be happy to feed it back to the Committee.

Mr Agnew: Thank you for your presentation. You referred to financial capability, which is a major concern of mine in this regard. I hope that, in suggesting that the Consumer Council should be able to act as a third party for vulnerable customers, I was not making work for you that you do not want.

Ms McKeown: That is our work. That is what we are here to do.

Mr Agnew: Well, absolutely, and as MLAs, we have constituents who are in difficult circumstances, whether it be with banks or other groups that handle confidential information, but it is important that vulnerable customers have an advocate who works on their behalf and that the banks accept that and work with us in that regard.

We have seen a similar systems failure with Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) when, in many cases, most people were being refunded tax and that was done automatically. Constituents came to me because they were getting bills from HMRC and were told that they could sort it all out with a simple phone call because it was HMRC's fault. However, that was not my experience. Equally, when I asked Ulster Bank and RBS representatives today whether they will be proactive, they certainly suggested that they will. However, I suspect that politicians, you and other consumer advocates will get a workload of people saying that they have not got their charges back. I am greatly concerned about that. As I say, I think that the ability to act as a third-party advocate is very important, and we should push this with the Ulster Bank.

I asked about an independent review. I was a bit concerned when one said that it will be an RBS review with independent monitoring and somebody else said that it will be an independent review. It sounds like two people, who were sitting beside each other, have different views on this. From your point of view, I think that it is important that there be an independent review. Who do you see as the appropriate body? Should it be the FSA? What model would you prefer to see the review take?

Ms McKeown: What is important to us is that there is a review of the entire issue at RBS and NatWest, but we want to see a very specific focus on the experience of Ulster Bank customers. We have seen UK-wide reviews and studies that have given a cursory glance to Northern Ireland. We will be absolutely insisting on a specific focus on Ulster Bank. We want to ensure that it is independent. We know that the governor of the Bank of England has called for an independent review. Whether that is carried out by the FSA as the regulator or by somebody commissioned by the FSA or the Bank of England remains to be seen. However, we will want to make sure that it is absolutely independent and has the necessary authority to ask all the questions and get, and insist on getting, the answers, but it needs to have a particular focus on the Ulster Bank and the experience of Ulster Bank customers.

Mr Agnew: Absolutely. Just one final question. There has been a lot of talk about the pressure on the staff at Ulster Bank, and rightly so. Have you experienced similar pressures? I imagine that, given how you are funded, you cannot just ramp up your opening hours and all the rest as and when. As an organisation, have you been able to cope with the increase in volume? What sort of increase have you seen in the wake of this?

Ms McKeown: Our teams have been working together. Incidents such as this challenge our resources, but we have a number of teams. We have direct-line support through our consumer support team; a money affairs team, which Joleen heads; and a communications team. They have all been working closely with our corporate services team to support people, so we have been able to manage. Our complete priority has been to give people access to their money and to intervene on behalf of consumers who have come to us. When they come to us, they are in a state of distress because they have tried their own bank or the Ulster Bank. We have been able to intervene and get some results.

Mr Agnew: OK. We certainly thank you for that work and for your answers.

Mr McGlone: Antoinette, thank you for attending today. It is unfortunate that we are meeting under these circumstances. Given the difficulties people face, there is real hardship.

I have been following the situation in Britain, and I read that the consumer champion Which? is advising NatWest customers to lodge a formal complaint directly with the bank as soon as they get a clear picture of any difficulties or problems they have incurred financially or process-wise or whatever.

That is predicated on any course of action that they might take later on with the Financial Ombudsman.

I presume that you would give the same type of advice to people when the picture does eventually become clear on, we hope, the 16th, although I doubt that it will be the 16th for a number of people. Presumably, you would give similar sort of advice: that people should make sure they give full details about what losses they may have incurred, including even to their credit rating, although I hope that that is not the case for a lot of people. I know of one case where a fellow could, through the difficulties that he is facing, be in that situation. I hope not, but, presumably, you would advise that similar course of action.

Ms Cunningham: Yes, absolutely. Throughout this, we have been asking consumers to be as proactive as they can and to keep a strict record of everything that is going in and everything that is going out and of everything that should have gone in and should have gone out. After the situation has been restored to normal, we will ask them, in the first instance, to make a complaint to the bank. If the bank does not resolve that to their satisfaction, we will ask them to take the matter to the Financial Ombudsman Service. We are happy to help signpost consumers by giving them those details. However, I think it is a shame that the bank has not given a commitment to be more proactive in this and to sort out its customers in the first instance rather than customers having to go to it.

Mr McGlone: To be absolutely clear, I am not referring specifically to Ulster Bank customers. There are people beyond that whose lodgements, flow of their businesses and, indeed, payments from the Social Security Agency have been affected by this. Is your advice to them that they also itemise any difficulties or problems that they have directly to the Ulster Bank? Perhaps I am taking you into an area that is slightly off beam, and you might want to reflect on it.

Ms Cunningham: They should complain initially to the banks that they hold an account with, because systems and processes are being worked out between different banks to do that. Also, I think it is unacceptable that, at this stage, we do not have a full redress procedure from the banks and from Ulster Bank. We were promised that at the end of last week, but, again, on this issue, we have seen the goalposts shifted. We are now hearing that it will be the end of this week or the start of next week before consumers know how they can go about getting redress and being compensated.

Mr McGlone: That is pretty shabby, is it not?

Ms McKeown: That is why we have been in touch with the Payments Council to ensure that it is on top of it and that it is making sure that banks are working together to sort that out between themselves so that customers do not get caught in a whole quagmire between their banks.

Mr McGlone: Chair, that is a useful piece of information, and it is important that, as a Committee, we formally reflect that to the banks and, indeed, to the Payments Council. The bank had a golden opportunity to, for want of a better word, showcase — although there is not much to showcase — but it did not do that. That would have inspired at least some sort of confidence in people. It is important that the Committee reflect that to the bank.

Mr Beggs: Thank you for presentation and for your assistance to consumers on this matter to date. I agree with you that the Ulster Bank has shown a distinct lack of leadership and given a lack of information to date, although I found the earlier session with the bank helpful. You talked about some of the most vulnerable people: basic account holders and, for that matter, anyone in receipt of benefit. If you have a wage or a salary, there are procedures whereby you go in with your wage slip and the Ulster Bank will release some cash to you. Has the Consumer Council come across individuals who are in receipt of regular benefits and who are being refused access to funding?

Ms Cunningham: A number of consumers have come in with that information, and that highlights the inconsistency in how the Ulster Bank is dealing with the issue. It is telling consumers that, if they go in with their ID and possibly a letter stating how much they normally get, that is sufficient. That is not what we are seeing. A lot of you highlighted the problems that your constituents are facing. We are seeing a piecemeal approach by Ulster Bank. We are coming up against situations that customers find themselves in, and the bank is asking us to direct them to it so that it can sort it out. The bank should have the policy in place and the consistency across its branch structures that ensures that no one falls across the stone and that this is sorted out in the first instance when people go into the branch.

Ms McKeown: We are concerned that, although we see movement when we get involved, we should not have to. We are happy to get involved, and we will take each case, but we should not have to. As Joleen said, the approach should be consistent across the branches.

Mr Beggs: This is very, very worrying, because vulnerable people could be forced into taking a payday loan, where they would build up even more debts. Worse than that, they might go to loan sharks. If there is some sort of generic fault to explain why that is happening, can you give some more information, either individually or through the Committee? It is very important that that is addressed, because those are the most vulnerable people in society, and we should not be exposing them to further risks. You talked about the importance that banking needs to place on putting customers first. In Northern Ireland, people seldom move bank. How complicated is that process?

Ms McKeown: That is a very good question. Before I answer it, I wholeheartedly agree with you about some of the short-term, high-interest loans. We were very aware of that as payday approached. We put out a very clear message to consumers to use that as the absolute last resort. We knew that it was the last resort and that people had reached the last resort.

On the issue of switching banks, the Consumer Council has consistently said that banks need to be more open and transparent about the products and services that they offer and the charges that they place on personal current accounts in particular. We have said that, if that information were clear for all customers from all banks, you could compare like with like so that it would make it easy to switch banks. In theory, it should be easy, but it is not always easy in practice. Recently, we have been working with banks on a banking manifesto. Joleen will say something about that.

Ms Cunningham: We asked consumers what they wanted to see most from their banks, and, funnily enough, switching banks and reliable help when they are doing so was one of the top 10 issues that came up. There was a fear among consumers of things going wrong when switching bank accounts, and they want to be assured that there is dedicated help from staff at every stage of the process. We have fed that in to the banks and been working with them on that issue. We have a fact sheet on switching on our website, and we are happy to send a hard copy out to consumers, should they require it.

Mr Beggs: In your briefing, you give some horrendous stories of people coming up to the holiday season. Some are already out on holiday and some could not get away from the airport because they had no access to funds. A family was not able to eat for two days until a family member physically flew out with some funds. What alternatives are there for those whose account has effectively been frozen? What other means are there for money to be electronically transferred? I do not know whether there are any alternatives. You used to be able to transfer via telegraph to other banks. Do you need specific access to your account, or are there other means? It would be helpful if there were greater knowledge of that.

Ms McKeown: Mr Beggs, that is another example of where customers were way ahead of Ulster Bank in relation to the problems that they were encountering, and the bank did not have the answers for them. One family, after five days of insisting that Ulster Bank did something, insisted that they wired them money via Western Union, but that happened only because the Ulster Bank customer herself absolutely insisted on it. We do have international banking systems and we are part of the European Union, so it is possible for Ulster Bank to wire a local bank money for people who are on holiday. Those are the types of issues that Ulster Bank should have been on top of and should have been doing. It has come out to say that it was able to do that, but that was only after it was forced into it. This is the type of ongoing response and continuity plan that we wanted to see and which we have not seen.

Mr Newton: Thank you for coming up today. My concerns are about a very simple phrase that appears in your document. It reflects where everyone needs to go, and I find it impossible in my mind to see where we are going to go. That phrase encapsulates everything:

"The public need to know that there is a clear plan in place now to resolve the situation going forward"

I am not really sure about that. I do not understand that there is a clear plan. I am not even sure that the representatives of the Ulster Bank had the ability to outline to us a clear plan to move forward.

I was appalled at some of the phrases that they used, particularly with regard to vulnerable people in our society, as Mr McGlone mentioned. Someone said — I am not sure whether they said that they would do it, but they certainly indicated that they would — that if anyone needed a taxi to get to a branch, they would provide one. They also said that, in some instances, they had gone out to meet people. I find that appalling, because that is not part of any clear strategy that they have outlined to their customers.

I am concerned about that, and I think that there is a major role for the Consumer Council at the personal end of the impact of this situation. The phrase "out-of-pocket expenses" was being used. It runs very glibly off the tongue to say that no one will be out of pocket, but the costs are much more than that. Your case studies have outlined some of the major costs that are not out-of-pocket expenses. I am concerned that people are going to have to enter into some sort of convoluted claims process, where they have to justify, in financial terms, all their out-of-pocket expenses.

That is the personal end of things and where we are going to go, but then there is the question of the future and of confidence. The bank is a key player in the economy and in our future well-being. We need to know that we, as MLAs, as the business community and as individuals can have confidence in the future. You have indicated how difficult it is to move your bank account; it is particularly difficult for some people. I do not believe that we will see a huge movement away from the Ulster Bank. I am sure that it is well aware of that as well.

What role can you play in dealing with this "out-of-pocket expenses" scenario and pushing the bank to produce a clear plan? Does your constitution allow you to work with the FSB and the Chamber of Commerce? If there is synergy there, would it not be better to see a united front moving forward on this on behalf of the business community and the individuals that you so adequately represent?

Ms McKeown: There is absolutely no doubt that all of us who have a responsibility and a commitment to represent citizens, customers and consumers have to continue to insist that Ulster Bank puts a proactive means of redress in place for its customers and customers of other banks. There is a clear role in that for the Consumer Council and for this Committee.

The plan is one of the first issues that we will raise with the Ulster Bank this afternoon. We will want to know when we will see it and what it will contain, and that will be the subject of discussion. I want to reassure members that what we have been saying publicly about Ulster Bank has been said even more robustly privately to the bank.

I also want to restate the Consumer Council's absolute commitment to working closely with Ulster Bank to regain consumer confidence. I think that is absolutely vital. We totally understand that customers are facing a very serious crisis at the moment, but for those who choose to stay with the bank, for whatever reason, it is vital that this does not happen again and that people regain trust in their bank, and in banking in general. We have a strong track record of working closely, very co-operatively and well with companies that have had their confidence dashed as a result of a crisis in order to restore confidence, and we are committed to doing that again.

The Deputy Chairperson: Antoinette, there are no more questions. Robin has suggested a way forward for the Committee in dealing with the matter and we will discuss that. Thank you for coming today, and I hope that you get on well in your deliberations with Ulster Bank later on.

Ms McKeown: Thank you. We will leave the Committee with an updated briefing and we will come back to you on our ongoing discussions with the UK Payments Council and the FSA, as you requested.

Mr Beggs: As a member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I wish to put on record my thanks for the invitation that was extended to us to attend these two sessions.