Bill welcomed the attendees from the IW Welsh Area who were visiting the NI branch and went on to detail the role of the Institute and the advantages of membership for non-members in the audience. Bill is also the Director of Engineering Procurement in Northern Ireland Water (NIW) and talked about the changes within customer service that NIW has implemented recently which have seen measurable changes to their scoring against other water companies. Bill also thanked the speakers for attending and welcomed the host of the first session, Ronan Larkin, Director of Finance and Regulation in NIW.

Ronan opened the session and talked about the customer perspective and the importance of customer service within the water industry.

The Keynote Address and first speaker was John French from the Consumer Council NI. John described the role of the CCNI and how it is unique within the UK. John detailed the history of the organisation from foundation in 1985 and how the customer experience has changed radically from that time with the advent of the internet and social media. CCNI are responsible for many services and have been so for water and sewerage works in NI since 2006.

John provided some data on the time and costs of customer complaints from receipt, through investigation to resolution. CCNI and NIW have been working closely together to put the focus on the customer and increase dispute resolutions. One major factor is determining what the customer actually wants. John demonstrated how effective these measures had been with NIW rising dramatically in the customer satisfaction league tables against other UK water companies.

Next speaker was John Backhouse, Head of Employee Insight from Harris Interactive UK whose talk was entitled “Unlock the Drivers of Customer Satisfaction.” John talked about customer surveys, how employees need clear purpose and the importance of the right people in the right jobs, being effectively utilised. He showed that charities have the highest level of engagement with staff and that there is a critical balance between staff engagement and customer service. Employees effectively engaged by a company are more likely to talk well of a company and resolve issues whilst the opposite is true for those not properly engaged. John had also set up an interactive survey which attendees were able to engage in via smartphones and which detailed the main points of his presentation.

Next up was Edel Creery from Northern Ireland Electricity Networks (NIEN), the Networks Connections Manager, talking on “Think Customer – Creating a Customer Focused Culture.” Edel detailed her role within NIEN, helping to connect about 9000 customers per annum to the electricity network in NI.

NIEN had undergone a customer focus revolution a few years ago with the ethos “Think Customer”. She talked about how customer expectations are high currently within an age of expectation and immediacy. NIEN review complaints on a regular basis and often work with the customer to resolve issues quickly.

Are you being served? Best practices in customer service

The annual NI area Autumn Seminar took place on Thursday 13th October 2016 at the Clandeboye Lodge Hotel in Bangor, Co. Down. The seminar was opened by the NI Area President, Bill Gowdy.
basis and encourage staff to think about the customer whilst recognising their own respective roles in the customer experience. Satisfied customers are easier to do business with and to get repeat works from.

Currently NIEN have a customer satisfaction score of 89% but are looking to improve this by engaging employees at all levels to ensure that the customer’s requirements are met throughout whatever the relevant processes are.

Edel detailed the processes in place for emergencies, for seasonal changes (winter) and within a commercially changing electricity network.

Ronan Larkin closed the session with an engaging Q & A session.

Matthew Lundy of NIW chaired the second session which was opened by Jamie Bill, the centre manager of a local shopping centre – Bloomfield Shopping Centre and Retail Park on “A Different Industry’s Perspective”.

Jamie showed how important customer service is to a retail park and retail in general and the lengths that he and his staff go to, to ensure a good customer experience. Dealing with customers from all demographics and with many disabled customers Jamie showed how the requirements and expectations of these differed. His staff are also often dealing with vulnerable customers and have on occasions helped prevent suicides by recognising the signs and by being well versed in how to deal with the issues these customers will have.

Disabled customers are also well catered for with arrangements in place for their collection, chaperoning throughout the various stores and collection home (via taxi) to provide them with a top range customer experience.

Ronan Murphy and Mark Townsend of Pye, Turner & Townsend talked next on the same topic - “A Different Industry’s Perspective”.

They showed that by providing a good customer experience you retain good customers and these are easier to keep than to attract new ones. The importance is to build long term relationships. They again emphasised the importance of staff training / engagement and the need to understand and empathise with the customer. It is very important to be proactive with clients especially if things have not gone according to plan and to raise and address issues as they arise.

Matthew closed the session with Q & A before lunch.

Session 3 was chaired by David Bell from Aecom.

First up was Des Nevin, Head of Customer Services in NIW on “Are NIW’s Customers Being Served?”

Des provided an overview of NIW’s service provision and showed how NIW was essential to the NI economy on a host of levels.

He set out NIW’s customer vision and told the story of their ongoing journey to a capable and efficient company focussed on the customer. By implementing a major refocus and improvement programme, NIW have considerably increased their ratings on customer service and are continuing to do so. Their call receipt / resolution has increased dramatically to now being better than the emergency services in terms of dropped calls.

Des showed the extent of the works that NIW had undertaken to date and the scale of the project that NIW have implemented and will continue to implement over the coming years.

Next Mark McEwen, General Manager of Customer Services at Scottish Water talked about “Customer Service and Best Practice”

Mark showed how Scottish Water had dropped slightly in the customer service ratings and how they were rectifying this. He detailed the structure of Scottish Water and their customer service objectives.

By customer consultation Scottish Water determine the level of investment in each area – targeting those that customers have the most issues with. Mark showed how, with the aid of customer focus groups consisting of members of the public, Scottish Water gauge public opinion and their performance. Mark went on to detail the initiatives in place to improve customer service and the mechanics in place to manage and measure these.

Next Debra Hughes the Customer Experience Manager from Welsh Water talked on “Are We There Yet?”

Debra gave an update on Welsh Water with some customer statistics and the mechanisms in place to manage these and to improve upon them. Welsh Water have five key promises to their customers and have increased the customer centre over recent years to ensure that they keep these promises.

Debra focused on the challenges that social media bring, whereby a bad experience is immediately headline news and how they mitigate this via processes, well trained staff and advertising. Welsh Water is a ‘not for profit’ organisation and this was not well known by most of their customers until addressed by an advertising campaign.

She finished by emphasising that no one can be complacent with customer service and that it is a constant struggle to improve in an ever changing world, this which Welsh Water has most recently addressed via a smartphone app to help people complete surveys and raise issues.

Next Margaret Gantly the Customer Service Manager of Irish Water talked on “The Irish Water Perspective on Customer Service”.

Margaret talked on the formation of Irish Water (IW) in 2013 and the challenges involved in migrating customers from the various local authorities which had previously managed the water industry in Ireland.

Irish Water as a new supplier immediately utilised technology, using handheld devices to collate and improve data. Margaret provided some data on the tasks and challenges that IW faced with the overall lack of data they inherited and their customers’ expectations after the issues with the introduction of water charges and metering.

Margaret provided some information on the IW Water Business Plan for the future and the need for a well-focused customer service initiative.

Last guest speaker was Paula Denvir, the Contact Centre Manager of Echo NI who entitled her presentation “The Customer Journey – We’re on the Way.”

Echo NI run the customer contact centre for NIW. Paula provided a breakdown of Echo NI and what they do for NIW customer service. She highlighted that people were the key to good customer service and showed how Echo NI work with their staff to train them and encourage them along a journey jointly with NIW.

Finally, after the final Q & A session, Bill Gowdy closed the seminar which everyone agreed was successful and provided excellent information on customer service to all.

By Terry McCrum, NI Area Committee