

Mike Mitchelson's Farewell Speech



Good morning delegates and visitors.

I would now like to add my own welcome to everyone here in Brighton for the NFRN's Annual Conference which of course is our Centenary Conference.

This year has really been a big year for us as we celebrate 100 years. And it certainly has been memorable, too.

Not many organisations stand the test of time and reach 100 years, but that is exactly what we have achieved.

In many ways the Federation is very different to the one founded back in 1919, but **our ethos remains firmly the same: to protect, promote and develop independent retailers in the UK and in Ireland.**

Our existence today, 100 years on, is a credit to the hard work and wisdom of members and individuals who have shaped the NFRN and guided it over the years.

So in this milestone year we must honour the pioneers who set us on this path...

... We must recognise and celebrate our many achievements,

... But we must also keep an eye to the future.

It is fair to say that we might not always have got things right...

... And that some of our good work may have fallen under the radar...

... But despite this we should all be proud that the NFRN continues to make a meaningful contribution to the lives of independent retailers.

Belonging to the Federation can and does make a difference.

The industry that we operate in constantly evolves, and that everyone within it has faced radical and significant changes.

To overcome these, the NFRN has had to change.

And we have done so by staying abreast of the hot topics and fine-tuning our offer so we remain strong, resilient and fit for purpose.

So taking the mantle of National President and all the responsibilities that come with it and leading the NFRN in its centenary year has been a huge honour.

It is also one that I have not taken lightly.

I would like to thank everyone who has worked with me and supported me during this very challenging but special year.

Firstly, the NEC and, in particular, Vice President Stuart Reddish, our immediate past president Linda Sood, and deputy vice president Muntazir Dipoti for their guidance and support.

My thanks must also go to our Trustees and NFC members.

Our national councillors who have not been afraid to challenge our proposals and actions and I thank them for contributing to some lively debates.

Back in our districts and branches there is an army of elected officials who do not always receive the recognition and appreciation that they deserve – so I am putting that right now!

I would also like to pay a huge thanks to Anne and my family at home, without their support and patience I would not have been able to do this job.

We have been without a chief executive for the past 18 months but with the help of our management and staff who do a wonderful job we have been striving to move the NFRN forward.

We are fortunate to have such dedicated and professional teams working for us.

Everyone's contribution has helped over this period of time which we have spent stabilising and bringing back together the organisation.

We are now in the process of putting in the building blocks as we move forward into the next century.

We are in the final stages of appointing a Chief Operating Officer, last week we held a range of interviews with applicants. Next week we will be conducting in depth interviews with the short listed candidates and we will then be expecting to make an appointment.

We are also in the midst of interviewing for a Head of Business Development, another important appointment we feel is vital to the Federation as we look for Business

Opportunities to help our members develop their businesses and address the challenges they face in the modern trading environment.

We have also completed a review of the Operations and News Departments and I can announce that we have amalgamated the two departments.

Brian Murphy has now become Head Of Operations and News, with Phil Williams becoming a Senior RDM.

[NFRN Connect](#) will now become part of their Membership Services team based in Durham.

But back to today and I would now like to focus on some of the progress we have made over the past 12 months.

In my inaugural address last June I vowed to step up engagement in a number of areas.

First and foremost this was with our members and I promised to talk to as many of them as possible to improve my understanding of the challenges they face and what they would like from our Federation so that our [benefits and services](#) could be better tailored to their needs.

There was a clear indication that they want business information, business meetings and trade shows where they can network and take something back to their businesses.

Through our programme of joint [open days, trade shows and social events](#), by taking national council meetings out to Leicester, Manchester and Durham and by stepping up our communications activity I believe we have made a good start.

But we can and need to do more ...

... we will continue to explore new ways of bringing together members who do not currently attend branch or district meetings

... we need to extend our appeal to non members and give them the chance to hear about new business opportunities and help them understand that they would benefit from being a member of the NFRN.

... Share experiences and best practice...

... grasp the opportunity to exploit gaps in the marketplace.

We need to continue to take every opportunity to shout about the Federation's successes so that members are aware of exactly what we do for them, what we have to offer and confirm that their membership provides them with the best representation and assistance in a difficult and ever changing trading environment.

Another of the aims I set myself was to improve our political engagement and great strides have been taken in this area through a wide range of political activity. There are a whole range of political decisions which affect our members businesses.

We have deliberately done a lot of work in raising the concerns about retail crime. Retail Crime and in particular abuse of members and their staff is a serious issue as members have been seriously injured and even suffered loss of life. As we all go about our day to day job of opening, closing or just generally working in our shops we have the right to feel safe in our environment, police and politicians should take the necessary steps to make sure we are.

Following discussions with the NFRN, crime minister Victoria Atkins has begun to realise the severity of our issues, she has accepted that Government need to do more and has called for evidence from the trade on measures that can be introduced to prevent both the physical and verbal abuse of shop owners and their staff.

By lobbying MPs and by working with them through the auspices of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Retail Crime, the issue of retail crime and attacks on retailers is now firmly on the agendas of ministers who can make a difference.

It is great that our voice is being heard and that parliamentarians now realise just how serious a concern this is to retailers up and down the country.

Going forward I would urge all delegates to respond to the crime minister's consultation ahead of it closing at the end of the month.

It is then our intention to meet with Mrs Atkins once again so we can explore the concrete steps that ministers, MPs and NFRN members can take to better protect everyone who serves behind a shop counter.

And it is crucial that the NFRN continues to put pressure on all of our politicians to make sure measures are taken. I make no apologies for again asking you all to play your part by contacting your MPs to visit their surgeries or get them to come to your shop.

Ultimately, well ahead of any decision making, the NFRN must be in front of politicians to spell out the impact that their policies and decisions have on the businesses of Independent retailers.

This is exactly what we are doing in Scotland where the NFRN is a leading member of an industry advisory group which has been set up by the Scottish government to consider the details behind the implementation of a deposit return scheme for bottles and cans.

Such a scheme is due to be introduced ahead of the 2021 Scottish parliamentary elections.

The NFRN has always been supportive of deposit return schemes but it is crucial that we ensure that when implemented these neither impede upon nor penalise smaller retailers.

Meanwhile, in Wales, the NFRN is now seen as the go-to organisation by the Welsh government for information and opinions regarding business and retailing.

Not only have Welsh ministers attended recent district council meetings, the district is in discussions with Alcohol Concern Wales over minimum unit pricing and has established a close working relationship with Business Wales.

Other political wins for the NFRN over the past year include the announcement that the 5p plastic bag charge would, subject to consultation, be extended to all retailers.

And in last autumn's budget the Chancellor of the Exchequer Philip Hammond addressed our concerns about the future of high streets by announcing some much-needed reductions in business rates along with the creation of the High Street Fund which will provide £675 million to make town centres in England "fit for the future".

So, again, political engagement is an area where the NFRN has made some real progress, but there are always new issues coming to the fore and, therefore, there is still more that our elected officials and political engagement staff can do to influence policy.

Over the past year service failings by publishers and news wholesalers have continued to remain a concern, with ever present challenges in terms of late or short deliveries.

It was disappointing that the Competition and Markets Authority decided – on prioritisation grounds – not to launch an investigation into the news supply chain despite all the evidence we shared regarding their monopolistic practices.

That said, we took some encouragement from the CMA confirming that it would be writing to all publishers to remind them of their responsibilities under competition law and that failure to do so would result in enforced action.

While an investigation into the unfair practices in the newstrade would have been very welcome, at least we have made the CMA aware of the injustices that exist.

And when systems fail, we will continue to provide them with firm evidence.

Throughout the past year we have increased our engagement with publishers and distributors, regular meetings have taken place where the NFRN has pressed home the financial challenges and pressures facing independent retailers on a daily basis.

What we have made abundantly clear is that the future survival of the news trade is dependent on all sectors working together.

This means that everyone's needs – not just those of shareholders – must be taken into consideration when business decisions are made.

And more importantly, that all sectors should receive their fair share of the income from cover price rises.

Without this the future of the news industry teeters on a precipice.

It is pleasing that some publishers appreciate the crucial role that retailers play and have accompanied cover price increases with pro rata terms.

Sadly, there are still too many others who fail to pass on the share we deserve.

However, stronger relationships have been created with our newstrade partners.

And I know that regular meetings will continue over the coming months so our concerns over poor service can continue to be laid bare.

Over the past 12 months we have continued to demonstrate against unfair and illogical carriage charges, culminating in a fantastic response to our Enough's Enough campaign.

The fact that more than 1,000 completed petition cards have been sent back to Yeoman House has illustrated clearly just how fired up members are about these ever increasing burdens which threaten the viability of many of our members' shops.

With regard to service from distributors I still strongly believe that some form of automatic compensation should be available when retailers suffer serious service issues.

If parcel and rail companies can compensate their customers for lateness, why can't our publisher and wholesaler colleagues do the same for late newspapers?

This is something that the NFRN will continue to pursue as I at last feel that we are on the point of a breakthrough in this area.

As part of our centenary celebrations, various events have been taking place up and down the country throughout the year.

As your National President I have been particularly proud to address guests at two important events to mark the NFRN's centenary.

The first, on November 7, brought together NFRN members and 100 of our leading suppliers at

News UK's central London headquarters.

Not only did this give us an opportunity to celebrate the NFRN's major milestone, but we had the chance to say thank you to them for their unstinting support for the Federation and for the tremendous support they give to all of our members.

We explained how looking after independent retailers was still our number one priority...

... that the Federation was changing and that we wanted to work with them more closely and do business with them for our members.

On February 12 around 500 guests assembled for our Centenary Dinner and our 2019 Awards ceremony.

This very special event was all about celebrating success:

The NFRN's success in grasping new opportunities to keep the independent news and convenience store sectors vibrant and forward thinking;

Our success in keeping the independent retail sector at the forefront of the minds of people who matter – whether in industry or the government.

And above all, our success in being an influential and well respected employers' trade association.

Meanwhile, the presentation of our 2019 Awards allowed us to recognise all that is best within our industry, with awards to individuals and to businesses that in their many different ways have made outstanding contributions to the independent news and convenience market.

For me, it has been a privilege to preside over the NFRN at such a significant time in its history.

A time when we have reflected on how and why the NFRN started...

...and Just how far we have come...

... Our achievements over all those decades...

...Of the unrivalled help and support we have given to our colleagues working in the independent retail sector...

... How we have positively raised the profile of both the NFRN and our members and the key role they play as the beating hearts of their communities.

It is also a year when we must also consider the future and what our industry has to offer...

...And, as we move into the next century, the exciting challenges ahead...

... So we can equip NFRN members across the UK and the Republic of Ireland with the skills required to build better and even more successful businesses...

... Ensuring they can continue to serve thousands of communities each and every day ...

...Delivering newspapers and magazines to approximately one million homes...

... And welcoming millions more people into their stores for the convenience, friendliness and top class customer service.

With the challenges facing independent retailers being greater than ever before, so is the need for a strong and dedicated NFRN.

So this Conference is a hugely important occasion.

Conferences shape the direction of the NFRN.

It gives us a time to reflect on the past year's achievements before deciding on policy for the coming year.

Over the next three days you, as delegates, will decide the next all important steps that the NFRN will take.

You decide on our priorities.

What has been evident from the past year is that when we speak loudly and with one voice we get heard.

So we have raised our voice and we are being heard by the people who matter.

And for the next three days these are your debates and it will be your voices that we will hear.

It is your Federation, and your voices will shape our future.

So do take part, join in and take pride in your NFRN membership.

It has been a real honour to serve you.