



**SOCIAL  
ACTION  
PLAN  
2009 - 2012**

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# Social Action Plan

**Strategic Intent and Action Plan  
2009 – 2012**



August 2009

# Strategic Intent



- 1** The Utility Regulator is a non-ministerial government department set up to protect customers by ensuring that the water, natural gas and electricity industries in Northern Ireland are regulated and developed within the parameters set out by the relevant legislation. The current world-wide economic down turn means that it is more important than ever that we take a coordinated and targeted approach to those in our society who are most vulnerable. On 1 April 2007 the Utility Regulator became the first organisation in the UK to take responsibility for the regulation of electricity, gas and water. This cross cutting remit represents a unique opportunity for a single organisation to bring forward a coordinated strategy for the protection of vulnerable utility customers in the provision of these essential services.

**2** At the heart of our duties and functions is the protection of the interests of water, sewerage, gas and electricity consumers in Northern Ireland, both present and future. We aspire to the following mission, vision and values:

**Mission:**

- Value and sustainability in energy and water.

**Vision:**

- We will make a difference for customers by listening, innovating and leading.

**Values:**

- Be a best practice regulator: transparent, consistent, proportional, accountable and targeted;
- Be a united team: one team, one mission;
- Be collaborative and co-operative;
- Be professional;
- Listen and Explain;
- Make a difference; and
- Act with integrity.

**3** Our strategic intent is to ensure that Northern Ireland's gas, electricity and water industries are developed in a financially, socially and environmentally sustainable fashion. This will ensure that we are fulfilling our role in ensuring that gas, water and electricity consumers are protected, both for today and in the future. The Utility Regulator published a five year Corporate Strategy in April 2009 ([www.niaur.gov.uk/uploads/publications/Corporate\\_Strategy\\_2009-14.pdf](http://www.niaur.gov.uk/uploads/publications/Corporate_Strategy_2009-14.pdf)), and one of the strategic priorities reflected in the Corporate Strategy is the protection of vulnerable customers. We committed ourselves to developing a Social Action Plan to address this priority.

**4** In January 2009 we published a consultation document entitled 'The Utility Regulator's Social Action Plan 2009-2014'. Preparation of this consultation document included a round of pre-consultation meetings with various stakeholders and the preparation of joint research with the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland. Following the end of the consultation period we also held a workshop on 1 June 2009 to raise awareness of the services provided and also to gain further feedback on how these services could be improved. For full details on the consultation process and the Utility Regulator's response to the comments received, please see our document entitled 'Social Action Plan Decision Paper 2009-2012', which is available on our web site [www.niaur.gov.uk](http://www.niaur.gov.uk).

**5** We have developed our three year Social Action Plan bearing in mind the issues of financial vulnerability and access to utility services and the differences between the energy and water industries. Currently, the issue of financial vulnerability only applies to energy services as, at present, domestic customers are not billed for water and sewerage services. It should be noted that these factors are embedded in our thinking not only as part of our Social Action Plan, but also as part of our everyday work. Core functions of the Utility Regulator include activities which contribute to the work on reducing financial vulnerability, for instance: regulating energy suppliers through price controls ensuring that only efficient costs are passed through to customers; promoting competition in the energy markets; and encouraging more efficient use of energy and water. Through

licence provisions, the Utility Regulator obliges utility suppliers to put processes in place to assist customers in difficulties and to provide services for vulnerable customers to ensure that they have equal access to services. The Utility Regulator monitors compliance with these licence conditions on an ongoing basis.



**6** Within the consultation document we proposed a forward work plan on social action for the Utility Regulator. Most respondents were broadly supportive of the activities set out in the work plan but a number of additional actions were suggested including those listed below:

- Further work on developing definitions of vulnerability;
- Raising awareness of access provisions and arrangements for helping customers in financial difficulties;
- Further work on best practice standards and codes of practice;
- Further work on accessibility of payment methods;
- Ongoing engagement with organisations representing vulnerable customers including Section 75 groups;
- Helping to develop communication channels between customers, advice agencies/workers and utility providers; and
- Establishing a monitoring and evaluation framework for the Social Action Plan to include a set of key performance indicators.



**7** Taking into account our available resources, our statutory remit, the responses to the consultation and our original proposed work plan, the Utility Regulator has revised its Forward Work Plan for Social Action 2009-2012, Table 1, to include where appropriate the addition of actions listed above. Year 2 and Year 3 actions in Table 1 will be reviewed again in the context of producing an overall Forward Work Plan for the Utility Regulator for 2010/11 and 2011/12. It is intended to undertake a full review of the Social Action Plan in 2011/12.

# Action Plan

**Table 1: Forward Work Plan for Social Action 2009 – 2012**

**KEY:** E = Electricity, G = Gas, W = Water, R = Retail, C = Corporate Affairs, SEM = Single Electricity Market, CAG = Common Arrangements for Gas, UR = Utility Regulator, CCNI = Consumer Council for Northern Ireland, DETI = Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment, EEL = Energy Efficiency Levy, NISEP = Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme, SAP = Social Action Plan, S75 = Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act

Action	Lead	Year 1 - 2009/10	Year 2 - 2010/11	Year 3 - 2011/12
<b>1. REDUCING FINANCIAL INSECURITY</b>				
Market Redesign	E/G	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitor SEM</li> <li>• Work on CAG, as per published work plan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitor SEM</li> <li>• Work on CAG, as per published work plan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitor SEM</li> <li>• Work on CAG, as per published work plan</li> </ul>
Corporate Refinancing	E/G	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review the benefits and current operation of the mutualisation model</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider the roll-out of the mutualisation model</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If appropriate implement roll-out</li> </ul>
Encouraging Competition in the Retail Energy Market	R	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• See UR's Forward Work Programme 2009-2010</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• See UR's Forward Work Programme 2010-2011</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• See UR's Forward Work Programme 2011-2012</li> </ul>
Price Controls	E/G/W	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• See UR's Forward Work Programme 2009-2010</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• See UR's Forward Work Programme 2010-2011</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• See UR's Forward Work Programme 2011-2012</li> </ul>
Metering	E/G	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consultation on review of gas pre-payment limit</li> <li>• Review current position of technology trials in ROI and UK</li> <li>• Consider accessibility issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implementation, if appropriate</li> <li>• Develop technical trial proposals for Northern Ireland</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implementation, if appropriate</li> <li>• Complete cost-benefit work on smart meters</li> </ul>
Social Tariffs	R	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scoping and options analysis paper to be consulted upon</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Subject to government decision, implement policy, as appropriate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policy implementation, if appropriate</li> </ul>
Growing the Gas Network	G	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ongoing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ongoing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ongoing</li> </ul>

Action	Lead	Year 1 - 2009/10	Year 2 - 2010/11	Year 3 - 2011/12
Debt Management Policies	C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set up working group to develop code of practice on helping customers to avoid debt and to manage their way out of debt</li> <li>• Set out terms of reference and work plan for project</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Report on progress</li> <li>• Get voluntary agreement from utility suppliers</li> <li>• If appropriate implement changes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitor compliance with code of practice</li> </ul>

## 2. EQUAL ACCESS TO UTILITY SERVICES FOR VULNERABLE GROUPS

Best Practice Standards	E/G/W/R	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compile best practice guidelines on access issues for utility services</li> <li>• To include provision of information in alternative formats and languages</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planned review of Guaranteed Standards of Service to take rural access issues into consideration</li> <li>• Access issues for gas customers considered</li> <li>• Guaranteed Standards of Service for Gas to be considered in line with DETI legislative timetable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implement changes as appropriate</li> </ul>
Codes of Practice on Customer Care	E/G/W	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review codes of practice for customer care to ensure they represent best practice</li> <li>• UR approved NIW's first code of practices in January 2008. NIW licence sets a review period of between 1 and 3 years</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NIW code of practices will be reviewed in consultation with CCNI</li> <li>• Initiate review of current arrangements in place for gas and consider the development of and harmonising codes of practice for gas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NIW code of practices will be reviewed again in 2012/13</li> <li>• Implement changes as appropriate</li> </ul>

Action	Lead	Year 1 - 2009/10	Year 2 - 2010/11	Year 3 - 2011/12
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review application of current codes of practice for electricity suppliers</li> </ul>		
Awareness Raising re. Access Provisions	C/R	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ongoing communication and engagement with representatives of vulnerable groups in partnership with utility suppliers and CCNI</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ongoing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ongoing</li> </ul>
Monitoring Licence Compliance	E/G/W	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Monitor and ensure compliance with licences and codes of practice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Monitor and ensure compliance with licences and codes of practice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Monitor and ensure compliance with licences and codes of practice</li> </ul>

### 3. ENERGY AND WATER EFFICIENCY

Energy Efficiency Levy Programme	C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Decision paper issued on future of EEL in early 2009</li> <li>Revised EEL (now NISEP) implementation to begin</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>NISEP implemented</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>NISEP implemented</li> </ul>
Water Efficiency	W	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Monitor compliance of NIW's duty to promote water efficiency</li> <li>Monitor progress against leakage targets</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Monitor compliance of NIW's duty to promote water efficiency</li> <li>Monitor progress against leakage targets</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Monitor compliance of NIW's duty to promote water efficiency</li> <li>Monitor progress against leakage targets</li> </ul>

Action	Lead	Year 1 - 2009/10	Year 2 - 2010/11	Year 3 - 2011/12
<b>4. WORKING WITH OTHERS</b>				
Consultation and Engagement with Stakeholders	All	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Add representatives of vulnerable groups including S75 groups, to consultee lists</li> <li>• Host workshops/ meetings on specific social action issues as appropriate</li> </ul>	• Ongoing	• Ongoing
Communication and Information	All	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote development of better communication channels between voluntary and S75 groups, advice sector and utility suppliers</li> </ul>	• Ongoing	• Ongoing
Partnership Working	C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to work with established groups such as NI Fuel Poverty Advisory Group and the Home Energy Conservation Authority Panel</li> </ul>	• Ongoing	• Ongoing

Action	Lead	Year 1 - 2009/10	Year 2 - 2010/11	Year 3 - 2011/12
<b>5. MONITORING AND REVIEW OF SOCIAL ACTION PLAN</b>				
Further Research	C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set up an academic panel of experts which will enhance research opportunities on issues relevant to the UR's work</li> <li>• Further research on financial vulnerability to inform code of practice on management of debt</li> </ul>	• Further research	• Further research
Review of Best practice	All	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep abreast of new developments in other jurisdictions</li> </ul>	• Ongoing	• Ongoing
Monitoring and Evaluation	C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set up framework to monitor and evaluate success of Social Action Plan</li> </ul>	• Ongoing monitoring and evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ongoing monitoring and evaluation</li> <li>• Work with key stakeholders to identify data available and gaps in data</li> </ul>
Review of Social Action Plan	C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ongoing evaluation</li> </ul>	• Ongoing evaluation	• SAP to be reviewed

**8** Other ideas for work to be taken forward, proposed by respondents to the consultation, are not individually listed in Table 1 but this does not necessarily mean that they are not worthy of further consideration. Some of the suggestions put forward by consultees are outside the remit of the Utility Regulator and it may be more appropriate for other agencies to take them forward. Where appropriate, we will raise these issues with our partner organisations. Other suggestions are not specifically mentioned but are included within an action which is already identified. Further detail on our response to suggestions put forward by consultees and our proposed actions are included in chapter 4 of our publication entitled Social Action Plan Decision Paper, where the individual consultation questions are discussed.

**9** Within the Social Action Plan consultation document we noted a number of ideas which are outside the statutory remit of the Utility Regulator. For example, the discussion included ideas on the regulation of home heating oil, the promotion of micro-generation and heat technology and the potential for bulk buying/brokering energy supplies for households. We do not intend to reiterate those ideas here, however, we retain our commitment to working with others to share our expertise and provide advice as appropriate.





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