

European Commission

## **Energy Consumer Checklist**

Prepared by the Utility Regulator and Consumer Council for Northern  
Ireland

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### **Section 1: Information Obligations**

#### **1. What organisations or bodies in my area can help me to find out more about switching supplier?**

Whether you are a domestic or business customer you are free to choose your electricity or natural gas supplier. Once you have decided which is best for you, contact your chosen supplier and they will assist you through the standard process of switching. Advice is available from the Consumer Council in their helpful [guide to switching domestic electricity supplier](#).

NIE (the electricity network / grid company) also has information on its website at: <http://www.nie.co.uk/marketopening/>

You can also get information from any of the gas and electricity suppliers; there is a list of these on the Utility Regulator website: <http://www.uregni.gov.uk/electricity/#switching>

#### **Electricity suppliers:**

Airtricity 084 5601 9093 [www.airtricity.com](http://www.airtricity.com)

Budget Energy 0800 012 11 77 [www.budgetenergy.co.uk](http://www.budgetenergy.co.uk)

Electric Ireland 0800 056 9914 [www.electricireland.com](http://www.electricireland.com)

Energia 028 9068 5900 [www.energia.ie](http://www.energia.ie) (*industrial customers only*)

Power NI (the new name for NIE Energy) 084 5745 5455  
[www.powerni.co.uk](http://www.powerni.co.uk)

#### **Gas suppliers:**

Firmus 028 9442 7836 [www.firmusenergy.co.uk](http://www.firmusenergy.co.uk)

Phoenix Supply Limited [www.phoenixsupplyni.com](http://www.phoenixsupplyni.com)

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#### **2. What are my rights as an electricity and / or gas consumer?**

This checklist provides consumers with answers to many questions

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on your rights as an electricity and/or gas consumer. The electricity and gas supply companies produce 'Codes of Practice' that describe what you can expect from them on issues such as paying for your energy supply. These Codes of Practice are available on company websites. Consumers should also refer to the terms and conditions of their particular product.

For independent advice on your rights and more information on a particular issue, please contact the Consumer Council on 0800 121 6022.

### **3. Where do I go to find out more on payment methods?**

Electricity and gas suppliers must offer at least three different payment methods, standard credit in arrears, direct debit and prepayment (card and keypad meters). You can choose which payment method you would like to use, with prepayment meters installed at no extra cost. Your energy supplier will provide you with more information on your choices.

The Consumer Council, has also produced a series of leaflets which include information on how you can pay for your electricity and gas. Follow the link to contact the [Consumer Council](#) to get the leaflet.

### **4. What information would I need to allow me to assess alternative supply offers?**

You will need to know how much electricity or gas you use. We tend to use less energy in summer than in winter so make sure you use a full year's consumption.

Pay As You Go customers should be able to find this out from their meter – if you do not know how to do this please contact your current electricity or gas supplier.

If you have access to the internet, you can use the Consumer Councils' [Gas and Electricity Price Comparison Tool](#) to compare the cost from different suppliers. The tool is a Microsoft Excel based spreadsheet that will require MS Office, Excel, OpenOffice or

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compatible program.

You can also compare the cost of each unit (known as kilowatt hour or kWh) of gas or electricity of the different gas or electricity suppliers. You will find this on your bill, on the suppliers' website or you can call the supplier and ask.

You will also need to know if there is;

- A standing charge that all customers must pay regardless of how much gas or electricity they use;
- A minimum charge which all customers have to pay even if you use very little gas or electricity;
- Expiry date of introductory offers and any charge for leaving a fixed term deal;
- Details of the standard tariffs that will apply after the introductory offers end
- Any other charges that may apply.

You can work out what your annual bill would be with a different supplier by taking your annual consumption number and multiplying it by the cost per kWh offered to you by the supplier you are thinking of switching to and adding the standing charge where there is one (don't forget to make sure you add a full year's standing charge – they are often shown as quarterly charges so multiply that amount by four to get the annual charge).

## **5. What information should be provided on my bill?**

Your bill should contain details of your total charges, information on your energy consumption, fuel mix information (electricity only) and details on your right to complain to your supplier. The Consumer Council has produced a guide to utility bills called 'Bills made easy'. You can contact the [Consumer Council](#) for further details.

## **6. Where do I look to find out more about energy efficiency measures in my area?**

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For information on how you can save energy within your home, renewable technologies as well as saving water please contact:

The NI Direct government web site at the email address below;



<http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/energywise>



## 7. Who is responsible for consumer protection in my area?

The Consumer Council has a responsibility to represent energy consumers in Northern Ireland and has a dedicated team which investigates enquiries and complaints on behalf of consumers about natural gas, electricity and coal. To Contact the Consumer Council call free on 0800 121 6022 email

[complaints@consumercouncil.org.uk](mailto:complaints@consumercouncil.org.uk) or visit [www.consumercouncil.org.uk](http://www.consumercouncil.org.uk)

For general consumer advice Consumerline is a one stop shop offering free help and advice to Northern Ireland consumers. Consumerline helps you avoid scams, dodgy deals, make a complaint and stay up to date with consumer law. Calls to Consumerline on the 0300 123 6262 number cost no more than a national call (01/02 numbers) - even from a mobile phone. Calls will also be included in any free minutes you may have from your network provider.

The Utility Regulator has a duty to protect the interests of electricity and gas consumers in Northern Ireland.

For more detail about how we look after electricity and gas

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consumers' interest please see our corporate plan [[http://www.uregni.gov.uk/uploads/publications/Corporate\\_Strategy\\_2009-14.pdf](http://www.uregni.gov.uk/uploads/publications/Corporate_Strategy_2009-14.pdf)], our forward work plan [[http://www.uregni.gov.uk/uploads/publications/2010-11\\_FWP.pdf](http://www.uregni.gov.uk/uploads/publications/2010-11_FWP.pdf)] and our annual report [[http://www.uregni.gov.uk/uploads/publications/2010-11\\_Annual\\_Report.pdf](http://www.uregni.gov.uk/uploads/publications/2010-11_Annual_Report.pdf)]

The Utility Regulator carries out its work in line with statutory duties set out in the Energy (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 and the Water and Sewerage Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. This legislation can be found on the [Office of Public Sector Information](#) website.

## 8. How do I find out the fuel mix of my energy consumption?

There will be a table on your electricity bill showing the fuel used to generate the electricity your supplier has sold to you. The Utility Regulator also puts this information on its website. The information for 2010 can be found

at: [http://www.uregni.gov.uk/uploads/publications/FMD\\_2010\\_UR\\_Paper.pdf](http://www.uregni.gov.uk/uploads/publications/FMD_2010_UR_Paper.pdf).

If you do not have access to the internet you can contact the Utility Regulator:

**By Post:** Utility Regulator, Queens House, 14 Queen Street, Belfast, BT1 6ED

**By Telephone:** +44 (0) 28 9031 1575

**By Fax:** +44 (0) 28 9031 1740

**By Email:** [info@uregni.gov.uk](mailto:info@uregni.gov.uk)

## 9. What other sources of energy are sold by suppliers in my area?

Electricity

Airtricity 084 5601 9093 [www.airtricity.com](http://www.airtricity.com)

Budget Energy 0800 012 11 77 [www.budgetenergy.co.uk](http://www.budgetenergy.co.uk)

Electric Ireland 0800 056 9914 [www.electricireland.com](http://www.electricireland.com)

Energia 028 9068 5900 [www.energia.ie](http://www.energia.ie) (*industrial customers only*)

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## Natural Gas

Natural gas is available in Greater Belfast and in the following towns:

- Ballyclare
- Ballymena
- Ballymoney
- Coleraine
- Larne
- Lisburn
- Derry/Londonderry
- Limavady
- Antrim
- Armagh
- Banbridge
- Craigavon
- Newry

**New towns are being connected to a gas supply on a regular basis. For more information visit:**

**<http://www.phoenixnaturalgas.com/naturalgas/is-gas-in-my-area/>**  
**or telephone 084 5455 5555 or**

**[http://www.firmusenergy.co.uk/for\\_home.aspx](http://www.firmusenergy.co.uk/for_home.aspx) or telephone 084 5608 0088 to check if gas is available where you live.**

## Home heating oil

Home heating oil is available from around 300 suppliers throughout Northern Ireland. Some areas will have more suppliers than others. To find a supplier check the Yellow Pages or search on line. A twice weekly survey of home heating oil prices is available on the Consumer Council website.

## Liquid Petroleum Gas (LPG)

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Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) is available in bottles/tanks/cylinders and is often referred to as bottled gas. It can also be supplied from one or more bulk tanks stored at a property and a number of residents can share the gas using a meter to calculate their use.

There are two suppliers of LPG in Northern Ireland – Flogas and Calor Gas. The gas is bought through local outlets available throughout Northern Ireland. To find an outlet in your area contact the supplier:

Calor Gas Northern Ireland Limited

Tel: 028 9045 5588

Web: [www.calorgasni.com](http://www.calorgasni.com)

Flogas

Tel: 028 9073 2611

Fax: 028 9073 2020

E-mail: [info@flogasni.com](mailto:info@flogasni.com)

Web: [www.flogasni.com](http://www.flogasni.com)

### Coal

Coal is available at outlets throughout Northern Ireland. Search your local services directory for outlets.

### Renewable microgeneration

Suppliers of renewable micro generation equipment and services are available throughout Northern Ireland. For more information contact the:

Energy Saving Trust

Tel: 0800 512 012

Web: [www.energysavingtrust.org.uk](http://www.energysavingtrust.org.uk)

E-mail: [ni.advice@est-ni.org.uk](mailto:ni.advice@est-ni.org.uk)

**10. How can I find out what sources of energy are used if my supplier's claim that its electricity is or parts thereof are 'green'**

### **is true?**

All electricity suppliers are required to publish the mix of fuel sources that went into the electricity they supplied in the previous year on their bills. This calculation is verified by the Utility Regulator.

## **Section 2: Contracts and Billing**

### **11. What minimum information is my supplier obliged to give me on my bill?**

The Utility Regulator is currently consulting on a proposal that lists the details that should be set out on or each with bill. At present suppliers are already required to provide regular billing information to customers. Some suppliers will already provide more detailed information on a voluntary basis or at least on request to customers.

The Consumer Council has produced a guide to utility bills called 'Bills made easy'. You can contact the [Consumer Council](#) for further details.

### **12. Who do I contact if my bills do not contain the minimum requirements requested by EU legislation?**

You should contact your supplier in the first instance. If you need any further information contact the [Consumer Council](#) [0800 121 6022] or the [Utility Regulator](#) [028 9031 1575] for advice and information.

### **13. Where can I obtain information on my actual consumption over a given period: a year or a month?**

If you receive quarterly bills you can use these to calculate your consumption over a year. If you have a Pay As You Go meter you can obtain this information directly from your meter or you can keep your receipts and use these to calculate how much you have spent in the year. If you have any difficulty, you can contact your supplier and request this information.

### **14. What information should I ask a potential supplier before**

## entering a contract?

- What is the best tariff they can offer for my circumstances? It will help if you provide the name of your current tariff and how much you have spent on electricity over the past 12 months.
- Am I 'locked-in' to this product for a fixed period? How much will it cost to end the contract before this?
- Are prices fixed for a specific period?
- Is there an introductory offer? How long will it last? What happens when it expires?
- Are there any extra costs involved, for example, paying a security deposit? Charges for buying a Keypad top up?
- Details of the cooling off period and who you should contact to cancel during this period. No cancellation charge will apply if the cancellation is requested during this period.
- Do I have to read my own meter and if so are there any penalties for not reading it in time?
- Does the offer require me to manage my account online?
- How can I pay? Is there discount or any additional charge if I choose to pay:
  - by direct debit?
  - by standard credit?
  - by prepayment (card or keypad meter)?
  - by frequent payment scheme?
  - What additional services can you offer? For example, large print bills or speaking bills?
- Ask for a written quote and either a copy of the contract or Terms and Conditions. Always read the small print before signing an agreement.

The Consumer Council has produced leaflets on switching your domestic gas and electricity suppliers. To get a copy contact the [Consumer Council](#).

## 15. How can I obtain access to complete and comprehensible information on supply offers?

All suppliers provide information on tariffs on their websites. The Consumer Council for Northern Ireland also provides information which can be found at:

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<http://www.consumercouncil.org.uk/energy/price-comparison-/>

**16. Once a contract is in force, how do I access full information on its complete contents including all standard terms and conditions?**

Your supplier must give you a copy of the Terms and Conditions of your contract; if you wish to take more time to read through the terms and conditions, ask the supplier to give you time to do this before signing.

The supplier should give you a copy of your contract after you have signed it; keep it in a safe place as you might want to read it again. You have up to 10 working days to change your mind after signing the contract.

If you lose your contract you can request a copy from your supplier.

**17. What are the general rules for cancelling my contract? In particular, when**

- moving to a new address?
- letting my apartment / house to somebody else?
- switching to another supplier?

Domestic consumers usually have an 'evergreen' contract under which they will continue to receive their energy supply until they cancel the contract, move premises or switch supplier.

Suppliers will have different requirements for closing accounts and this will be stipulated in your contract. Some suppliers may charge an exit fee so it is important to check the terms and conditions before you sign up and when cancelling your contract.

**18. Where can I find out about my suppliers own conditions for cancellation?**

The terms and conditions of your contract must contain a termination clause which details what you have to do to end your contract. This may involve a set period of notice you need to give your supplier. If

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you do not have a copy of your contract, look for the Terms and Conditions on the suppliers' website or contact your supplier.

**19. Do I have the right to cancel my contract if**

- the price changes?
- I am moving to other premises?

- the price changes?

Yes. If the price of your electricity or gas is changing your supplier must let you know. They must also tell you that you have the right to cancel the contract if you do not want to pay higher charges for example and tell you how to do this. Some suppliers offer fixed term products and there may be charges for leaving a fixed term contract before its expiration – make sure to check this with your supplier.

- I am moving to other premises?

Yes. However, there may be a cancellation charge, depending on the Terms and Conditions of your contract.

**20. I have moved / switched to a new supplier. Do I still have to pay my bills for my old address / coming from my former supplier?**

Switching

Your new supplier will normally inform the old supplier that you have switched. After switching supplier you will receive a final bill from your old supplier covering the energy you used between the last bill and the day you switched to the new supplier, plus any outstanding previous charges. This bill will be sent to you within 6 weeks of changing supplier, which you are obliged to pay.

Moving

If you are moving house you need to inform your supplier and give them the moving date and a closing meter read. You will receive a final bill for your old address. Once this has been paid you should receive no further bills for your old address. It is important that you ensure you tell your supplier that you are moving address as you may still be considered responsible for consumption at your old address and receive bills for this, even if you move out and have not informed

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them.

**21. What complaint handling mechanism has my supplier set up? What are the dispute resolution procedures in my area? To whom can I address myself for assistance without cost?**

Your supplier must have a Code of Practice detailing its complaints procedure. Ask your supplier for a copy.

If you cannot resolve your complaint with your supplier, you can contact the Consumer Council who may be able to help you resolve the complaint. In some cases, the Utility Regulator can resolve the complaint where the Consumer Council is unable to do so.

**22. Is there a minimum level of supply quality? Am I entitled to compensation if the predetermined quality of supply is not met?**

Energy supply companies must adhere to a number of Codes of Practice that stipulate the minimum levels of service you should receive. You can request copies of these Codes directly from your energy supplier.

NIE has a Guaranteed Service Standards scheme. If NIE fails to meet the appropriate standard you will be entitled to receive a fixed financial amount. Details of the standards this covers is available on the NIE website. The scheme covers problems like an interruption to your electricity supply.

Following consultation, the Utility Regulator is currently finalising its decision paper outlining Guaranteed Services standards in gas which will apply to Phoenix Natural Gas and firmus (the network operators). This scheme will be introduced during 2012.

It is important to note, in both gas and electricity, regardless of your chosen supplier, the quality of your supply will be the same.

**23. What steps must a supplier take first before disconnecting me from supply for an unpaid bill?**

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If you are having payment difficulties contact your supplier as soon as possible. Your supplier must:

- **Offer you advice on using gas or electricity more efficiently to help you reduce your bills;**
- Work with you to produce a realistic payment plan;
- **Offer you a prepayment meter to help you budget for electricity or gas.**

If you feel you are struggling to make ends meet and need help, contact a money advisor at

one of the following organisations:

advice4debtNI: Freephone 0800 917 4607

Advice NI: 028 9064 5919

Citizens Advice: 028 9023 1120

Consumer Credit Counselling Service: Freephone 0800 027 4990

**24. What steps should I take if I think that one of my contract terms has been changed without adequate notice? Who should I contact?**

Contact your supplier in the first instance. If you are still unhappy contact the [Consumer Council](#) on 0800 121 6022 as a first step for advice.

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### **Section 3: Prices, Tariffs and Monitoring**

**25. How can I distinguish between price, charge and tariff on my bill?**

Your contract must contain details of the price you are paying for your energy, charges for any additional services (for example, boiler maintenance schemes) and the name of the tariff you have agreed to.

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**26. What information should I receive from my supplier on his charging system?**

Your bill should clearly show you the units used, tariff charges and standing charges where applicable. Any levies or taxes (such as the Climate Change levy and VAT) must also be clearly identifiable.

**27. What are the rules on the calculation method to be applied by my supplier?**

Suppliers must clearly demonstrate on the bill all charges that lead to the total bill amount. You should contact your supplier should you require further clarification of the charges included on your bill.

**28. Will I be asked for deposits and connection charges? How can I find out more about them?**

Some suppliers may ask for a security deposit, depending on your individual circumstances. These must be detailed in your contract. .

Details of electricity connection charges, which are payable to NIE (the network operator) are available at: <http://www.niegetconnected.co.uk/> . Details of gas connections can be found at <http://www.phoenixnaturalgas.com/naturalgas/how-to-get-connected/> and [http://www.firmusenergy.co.uk/faqs\\_specific.aspx?section=connections](http://www.firmusenergy.co.uk/faqs_specific.aspx?section=connections) .

**29. How can I distinguish offers? Can I get information on energy prices per unit, taking account of parameters for the calculation of process and possible indexation mechanisms applying to the full contract period?**

It is important when examining offers to compare like with like. Ensure that any standing or additional charges are taken into account when assessing the overall cost of the contract.

**30. Where can I access an electronic price calculator?**

The Consumer Council has energy price comparison tools which you can download from: <http://www.consumerCouncil.org.uk/energy/price-comparison/> . The tool is a Microsoft Excel based spreadsheet that

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will require MS Office, Excel, OpenOffice or compatible program.

**31. Where do I find a tool helping me to compare different supply offers?**

The Consumer Council has energy price comparison tools which you can download from: <http://www.consumercouncil.org.uk/energy/price-comparison/> . You will need an excel spreadsheet package on your computer to view this.

**32. Is there a recent price monitor published for my area?**

The Consumer Council has energy price comparison tools which you can download from: <http://www.consumercouncil.org.uk/energy/price-comparison/> . The tool is a Microsoft Excel based spreadsheet that will require MS Office, Excel, OpenOffice or compatible program.

**33. What payment options are open to me?**

All gas and electricity suppliers must offer a range of payment methods but at least standard credit, direct debit and prepayment. Some suppliers offer other ways to pay for example at the Post Office. Ask your supplier or a supplier you are considering switching to see what options they offer.

The Consumer Council has produced a series of leaflets which include information on how you can pay for your electricity and gas. Contact the [Consumer Council](#) to get the leaflet.

**34. Is there a system of regulated prices or other forms of price control applied in my area? Do I have the right to receive energy at a price fixed by a national authority?**

Power NI tariffs for domestic and small business customers are regulated by the Utility Regulator as they have the largest market share of the domestic market. A briefing about the latest tariff review can be found at:

[http://www.uregni.gov.uk/uploads/publications/October\\_2011\\_Draft\\_Retail\\_Tariff\\_Background\\_Briefing\\_V2\\_0.pdf](http://www.uregni.gov.uk/uploads/publications/October_2011_Draft_Retail_Tariff_Background_Briefing_V2_0.pdf) and a Questions and Answers paper can be found at:

[http://www.uregni.gov.uk/uploads/publications/Power\\_NI\\_Suppl](http://www.uregni.gov.uk/uploads/publications/Power_NI_Suppl)

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## **y Tariff Announcement Q and As v2.pdf**

Phoenix Supply Limited prices are also regulated by the Utility Regulator as they too have the largest market share in the gas market. Details are on their website at:

<http://www.phoenixsupplyni.com/at-home/help-and-advice/tariffs-and-payment-options/> .

### **35. Whom do I have to contact in order to be provided with a consumption meter? Do I have a choice in the type of meter I can have / can acquire?**

NIE (the network operator) is responsible for electricity metering in Northern Ireland; you can contact them on 08457 643 643.

In Natural Gas, contact Phoenix Natural Gas in the Greater Belfast and Larne areas, and firmus energy in the Ten Towns.

### **36. Is there a maximum period specified, over which my supplier has to provide me with information on my actual consumption of gas and / or electricity?**

New rules are being introduced to make sure all suppliers give annual up-dates on your consumption [If you have not been with your supplier for a less than a year you will only receive a figure for part of the year.

### **37. When and how is my consumption meter read?**

Electricity

- NIE is responsible for reading your electricity meter, including 'keypad meters', regardless of which supplier you choose. They will pass on your meter-reading to your supplier so the supplier can send you a bill. Your meter-reading cycle will remain as it is now, even if you change supplier. If you are out when NIE calls to read your meter you can read your meter yourself and telephone them on 084 5609 3030, e-mail at [meter.reading@nie.co.uk](mailto:meter.reading@nie.co.uk) or through the website: <http://www.nie.co.uk/customerinformation/meterreading.htm>

Gas

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Your supply company is responsible for meter reading

- Firmus energy will call to read your meter once a year for customers who manage their gas account using the internet and twice a year for those who do not. To submit your own meter reading to firmus, telephone 08456 08 00 77 (automated service), e-mail [billing@firmusenergy.co.uk](mailto:billing@firmusenergy.co.uk) or through the 'My account' tab on the firmus website at <https://accounts.firmusenergy.co.uk/login.php>
- Phoenix Supply will call to read your meter four times a year if you are standard credit meter customer and do not pay by monthly Direct Debit and once per year if you do pay by monthly Direct Debit or Pay-As-You-Go. To submit your own meter reading to Phoenix Supply telephone 0845 900 5253 or the dedicated meter reading line on (028) 9055 5864 or online at [www.phoenixsupplyni.com/at-home/my-account/submit-a-meter-reading/](http://www.phoenixsupplyni.com/at-home/my-account/submit-a-meter-reading/)

Both electricity and gas suppliers may offer a cheaper tariff if you submit your own meter reads on a regular basis. Contact individual suppliers for details.

If there is no meter-reading available your next bill will use an estimated meter reading. This will be based on your previous consumption pattern. If this is the case, take an actual meter reading and provide it to your supplier so they can produce a more accurate bill.

**38. Am I exposed to increasing energy prices during a given contract period? Are there public measures reducing the risk to be confronted with significant price increases during my contract duration?**

This depends on your contract. Some contracts will allow for variations in price – although the contract should say when you will be informed of price changes and state where you can get up-to-date information on prices. Other contracts will be for a fixed-term tariff where you agree to pay a specified price for a fixed period,

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regardless of whether variable tariffs go up or down. Check with your supplier before you sign a contract if the price is fixed, if so, how long it is fixed for and what penalty there is if you want to terminate the contract earlier than the fixed term.

**39. What is the legal procedure before a supplier can change the supply price?**

All suppliers must give you at least 21 days advance notice of any proposed change to contracts, where a change relates to price the supplier must give notice of it within 28 days of the change becoming effective.

They must also inform you of your right to terminate the contract you have with them and the procedure for doing so.

(NB the information contained above is currently subject to consultation as part of the implementation of the EU Third Internal Energy Package and is therefore subject to change).

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**Section 4: Free Choice of Supplier**

**40. Who are the active suppliers in my area?**

The active suppliers in your area can be found on the Consumer Council website at <http://www.consumercouncil.org.uk/energy/gas/> or <http://www.consumercouncil.org.uk/energy/electricity/> . Alternatively you can telephone the Consumer Council on 0800 121 6022.

**41. How do I cancel my contract and switch to a new supplier?**

Contact your chosen supplier - they will explain what details they require for you to switch to them. You will normally need your name, address, meter number and meter reading.

The Consumer Council has produced two leaflets to help you through the switching process.

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**42. What are the minimum general conditions for cancellation in case of switching?**

You should check the Terms and Conditions of your contract.

**43. I found a more interesting offer for energy supply and have decided to switch. Who takes care of the paperwork?**

Contact the new supplier; they will contact your old supplier and your new supplier will deal with the paperwork.

**44. When switching supplier, is there a risk of disconnection?**

No. There will be no interruption to your supply because you switch. Nor will there be any changes to your meter, your wiring, your pipe work or connection. For electricity customers there will be no change to how and when your meter is read. For gas customers, your meter will be read by your new supplier.

The Consumer Council have produced two leaflets to help you through the switching process.

**45. What reasons may exist that would stop me switching supplier?**

There are currently no reasons that would stop you switching supplier unless your chosen new supplier refuses to supply you. You cannot be stopped from switching supplier because you are in debt; choosing a cheaper tariff can help you pay off your debt sooner. Your old supplier will tell the new supplier you have outstanding charges and they will decide who you need to pay the debt to after the switch. You should however consider:

Electricity.

- The supplier may require a positive credit check and/or security deposit;

Natural gas.

- The supplier may require a positive credit check and/or security
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deposit;

- If you owe £100 or more to your current supplier the new supplier will offer either to :
  - Take the debt and agree repayments terms with you;
  - Take the debt and install a Pay As you Go Meter that can recover the debt in instalments; or,
  - Require you to clear the debt with your current supplier within three working days, prior to the customer transfer taking place.

If you refuse the option given to you the new supplier may refuse to accept you as a customer

**46. Are there situations that would prevent me from switching to a new supplier without penalties?**

Unless your contract states there are penalties for terminating the contract your supplier cannot penalise you for switching.

**47. How much will it cost me to change supplier?**

There is no charge for switching supplier, however some contracts include a cancellation charge. This will be detailed in your terms and conditions.

**48. What is the maximum duration a supplier is able to tie a consumer for contractually?**

There is no maximum period.

**49. Who should I contact if I think that I have been unfairly charged to change supplier?**

Contact the supplier who charged you first; if the supplier does not deal with your complaint then contact the Consumer Council who may be able to assist you in resolving the issue.

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## Section 5: Connection to Network

### 50. Who do I contact to be supplied with energy for the first time?

#### Electricity

Contact NIE (the network / grid company) on 08457 643643 for more information. If you have internet access go to <http://www.niegetconnected.co.uk/newdomestic.php> .

#### Natural Gas

In the Greater Belfast Area contact Phoenix Natural Gas (the company that lays and maintains the pipes) on 084 5455 5555 or if you have access to the internet go to:

<http://www.phoenixnaturalgas.com/naturalgas/how-to-get-connected/at-home/>

If you are in any of the firmus energy areas telephone them on 084 5608 0088 or on their website:

[http://www.firmusenergy.co.uk/for\\_home\\_10\\_towns.aspx?dataid=499867](http://www.firmusenergy.co.uk/for_home_10_towns.aspx?dataid=499867)

### 51. Do I have to sign a contract and who do I sign a contract with?

You will have to sign an application for a connection which is a contract for the connection, not for the supply of gas or electricity.

You will also enter into a contract with your chosen supplier of gas or electricity. You will not necessarily sign your name to a written contract. For example you may switch supplier on line or on the telephone. In doing this you and your supplier will be agreeing the Terms and Conditions of the contract. The Terms and Conditions of the contract will be available to you on the suppliers' website or will be sent to you by the supplier on request.

### 52. How do I find out who my supplier is?

The information should be contained on your bill or statement, however if you are unsure you can contact the network operator :

For electricity contact:

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NIE on 08457 643 643 or [customercontact@nie.co.uk](mailto:customercontact@nie.co.uk)

For gas contact:

Phoenix Natural Gas on 08454 55 55 55 or

<http://www.phoenixnaturalgas.com/naturalgas/contact-us/>

If you live in the Greater Belfast or Larne areas.

or

Contact

Firmus energy on 08456080088 or email

[furtherinfo@firmusenergy.co.uk](mailto:furtherinfo@firmusenergy.co.uk)

For all other areas where gas is available.

**53. I do not have a formal supply contract or even a valid offer for energy supply. Which supplier is obliged to provide me with energy against payment with or without a formal contract? Who is my default supplier?**

Electricity

Power NI is the default electricity supplier.

Natural Gas

Phoenix Supply Limited is the default gas supplier in Greater Belfast and Larne. Firmus energy is the default gas supplier in all other areas where gas is available.

**54. Do I have to sign a contract to be physically connected to an energy distribution network and with whom?**

Yes. For electricity you will have to sign an application with NIE [the network operator. For natural gas you will have to sign an application with either firmus energy or Phoenix Natural Gas depending on where you live.

**55. Who is my contact in the event of disruption of energy**

**supplies? Who should I contact if I have another technical question concerning my energy supply?**

If your electricity supply is interrupted, you should contact NIE, the network operator to inform them of the fault – 08457 643 643

If your gas supply is interrupted, or if you smell gas, contact the Northern Ireland Gas Emergency Service on 0800 002 001.

**56. Who is liable for damages that occur in my household due to disruption of service?**

If either the network operator or your supplier has been negligent they may be liable for damage.

Your home insurance may cover costs incurred by due to an interruption in supply.

For further information contact the Consumer Council on **028 9067 2488** or [info@consumercouncil.org.uk](mailto:info@consumercouncil.org.uk)

**57. If I happen to encounter temporary financial difficulties, how can I avoid being cut off from the basic energy supply that is vital for my household's heating and cooking needs?**

Contact your supplier as soon as you realise you might find it difficult to pay your bill. Each supplier must have a Code of Practice for dealing with customers who are having difficulty paying bills. These are available by contacting your supplier.

Your supplier must help you work out a realistic payment schedule. If you cannot keep to this schedule your supplier may offer you a prepayment meter, you should also check which discounts are available to you.

If you feel you are struggling to make ends meet and need help, contact a money advisor at one of the following organisations:

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advice4debtNI: Freephone 0800 917 4607

Advice NI: 028 9064 5919

Citizens Advice: 028 9023 1120

Consumer Credit Counselling Service: Freephone 0800 027 4990

**58. What happens if my supplier goes out of business? Who is my supplier of last resort?**

Electricity

Power NI is the Supplier of Last Resort [SOLR] for Northern Ireland. If your supplier goes out of business you will automatically become a customer with Power NI. The SOLR must offer you a tariff that is appropriate for your needs but you are free to choose any offer from any other supplier; the SOLR arrangements are in place to ensure you have a continuous supply.

Gas

The Utility Regulator will decide at the time who will be your supplier if your supplier goes out of business.

**59. In the case of a national, regional or local crisis or other incidents seriously affecting the supply of energy where can I get information regarding emergency measures?**

Information will be available from NIE (the electricity network operator) on 084 5764 3643 or the Northern Ireland Gas Emergency Service on 0800 002 001 depending on the nature of the crisis. If the crisis is national then, depending on its nature, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will ensure the local media is kept informed.

The NIE Critical Care Scheme is a list of those consumers who require electricity for essential or life-saving medical equipment. These consumers are given priority, as regards to the provision of information, during planned or unplanned interruptions to supply.

Phoenix Supply Limited and firmus energy also maintain customer care registers for customers who are 60 years and over, disabled or

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chronically sick.

If you wish to be on these registers contact NIE, Phoenix Supply or firums energy.

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## **Section 6: Complaint Handling**

### **60. Where can I find out more about my supplier's complaint procedure?**

Contact your supplier; there will be details on how to access your supplier's complaints procedure on your bill. You can also contact the Consumer Council on **028 9067 2488** or [info@consumercouncil.org.uk](mailto:info@consumercouncil.org.uk)

### **61. Does my supplier make use of an ombudsman?**

There is currently no energy ombudsman scheme in Northern Ireland. However, the Consumer Council will assist with complaints where you have exhausted the supplier's procedure.

In certain cases, the Utility Regulator may be able to resolve complaints where the Consumer Council is unable to reach a satisfactory resolution.

### **62. I need support to settle a dispute with my supplier or network operator. From which neutral and independent national body can I request assistance at no cost in case of such a dispute?**

If you have exhausted your supplier/network operators complaints procedure and are dissatisfied with the outcome the Consumer Council will assist you in resolving your complaints.

### **63. What are the local measures to protect consumers of electricity and gas? Who can I contact to find out more about them?**

You should contact the Consumer Council to obtain information about

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your rights as an energy consumer.

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## **Section 7: Consumer Representation**

### **64. Who is responsible for the protection of consumers in my area? What actions are currently underway by these organisations to protect consumers?**

The Utility Regulator has a duty to protect customers, for full information on the Utility Regulator's work see our web site <http://www.uregni.gov.uk/>

The Consumer Council also works to protect consumers, for further information phone 028 9067 2488 or see <http://www.consumercouncil.org.uk>

### **65. There is no competitive offer in my area and only one supplier. Who should I talk to about ways to promote competition?**

The Utility Regulator has worked hard to encourage competition in both the domestic electricity and gas markets. A number of new entrants have already entered the energy market and the [Utility Regulator](#) will continue to promote competition to ensure choice for consumers.

### **66. Which public body is responsible for promoting fair and effective competition?**

The Utility Regulator is responsible for promoting competition; our Corporate Plan [[http://www.uregni.gov.uk/uploads/publications/Corporate\\_Strategy\\_2009-14.pdf](http://www.uregni.gov.uk/uploads/publications/Corporate_Strategy_2009-14.pdf)] outlines our duties and how we achieve them, identifying strategic themes and priorities. The Forward Work Plan [[http://www.uregni.gov.uk/uploads/publications/2010-11\\_FWP.pdf](http://www.uregni.gov.uk/uploads/publications/2010-11_FWP.pdf)] outlines what we will do each year. Both these documents are publicly consulted upon in order to garner the views of our stakeholders including the electricity, gas and water industries and consumer and political representatives.

Our Annual Report [<http://www.uregni.gov.uk/uploads/publications/2010->

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**11 Annual Report.pdf** outlines what we have achieved over the year.

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## **Section 8: Social Measures**

### **67. What will happen once I have not reacted to a payment notice?**

Your supplier will contact you to notify you that your bill is overdue. If you have not settled your bill you should contact your supplier as soon as possible to discuss and agree an appropriate payment arrangement. To default on payment without contacting your supplier may affect your credit rating.

### **68. How can I avoid disconnection if I cannot pay my bill?**

Contact your supplier as soon as you realise you might find it difficult to pay your bill. Each supplier must have a Code of Practice for dealing with customers who are having difficulty paying bills.

Your supplier must help you work out a realistic payment schedule. If you cannot keep to this schedule your supplier may offer you a prepayment meter.

If you feel you are struggling to make ends meet and need help, contact a money advisor at

one of the following organisations:

advice4debtNI: Freephone 0800 917 4607

Advice NI: 028 9064 5919

Citizens Advice: 028 9023 1120

Consumer Credit Counselling Service: Freephone 0800 027 4990

To download a copy of this budget planner visit [www.consumercouncil.org.uk](http://www.consumercouncil.org.uk) You may also wish to seek independent advice on dealing with debt:

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**69. What do I do if I am disconnected?**

You will need to contact your supplier to discuss reconnection.

**70. Is there a definition of vulnerable consumers applied in my area? What criteria do I have to fulfil to be considered as an aid worthy (vulnerable) consumer?**

Vulnerable customers are defined as those who are i) of pensionable age ii) chronically sick iii) disabled iv) on low income or v) live in a rural area (electricity consumers). The level and type of services available depends upon your circumstances.

If, due to vulnerability, you need any help to access the full services available from your electricity or gas supplier you should first contact your supplier.

Electricity and suppliers in Northern Ireland offer a range of free additional services for older consumers or those with specific needs.

To find out more about these services contact your supplier.

If your supplier is unable to help, you should contact the Consumer Council on 028 9067 2488 or [info@consumercouncil.org.uk](mailto:info@consumercouncil.org.uk)

**71. What support and protection are available for consumers in delicate financial situations in my area?**

You may be able to get additional financial and / or energy efficiency help depending on your circumstances. We would advise you to seek assistance from an advice centre or advocacy organisation relevant to your circumstances or alternatively, contact your supplier who will tell you about other sources of help and assistance.

If you feel you are struggling to make ends meet and need help, contact a money advisor at

one of the following organisations:

advice4debtNI: Freephone 0800 917 4607

Advice NI: 028 9064 5919

Citizens Advice: 028 9023 1120

Consumer Credit Counselling Service: Freephone 0800 027 4990

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To download a copy of this budget planner visit [www.consumercouncil.org.uk](http://www.consumercouncil.org.uk) You may also wish to seek independent on dealing with debt.

**72. How can I reduce my consumption in order to pay less?**

Your supplier must help you use your electricity or gas more efficiently and this will reduce your consumption. Each supplier has a Code of Practice on using electricity / gas efficiently and you should contact them and request a copy. Alternatively energy advice is available - see question 6 above

**73. Who can I contact to find out about local measures to vulnerable consumers in my area?**

As measures available vary from time to time, we would advise you to seek assistance from an advice centre or advocacy organisation relevant to your circumstances or alternatively, contact your supplier who will tell you about other sources of help and assistance.

Electricity, gas and water suppliers in Northern Ireland offer a range of free additional services for older consumers or those with specific needs.

To find out more about these services contact your supplier.

**74. My income does not allow me cost intensive energy efficiency investment. What else can I do?**

For information on all sources of help you should check the NI Direct government web site at the web address below;



<http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/energywise>

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For free, independent advice call

**0800 512 012**

The Consumer Council has also produced a leaflet on energy efficiency. To get a copy contact the Consumer Council.

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## **Section 9: Unfair Commercial Practices**

### **75. What is an unfair commercial practice? What can I do in case of unfair practices?**

A commercial practice is unfair if:

- it is not professionally diligent, and
- it materially distorts, or is likely to materially distort, the economic behaviour of the average consumer. For example, because of the practice, the average consumer would buy a product they would not otherwise have bought, or would not exercise cancellation rights when otherwise they would have done so.

There are also 31 practices which are banned outright by legislation including:

- Claiming to be a signatory to a code of conduct when the trader is not.
  - Displaying a trust mark, quality mark or equivalent without having obtained the necessary authorisation.
  - Claiming that a code of conduct has an endorsement from a public or other body which it does not have.
  - Claiming that a trader (including his commercial practices) or a product has been approved, endorsed or authorised by a public or private body when the trader, the commercial practices or the product have not or making such a claim without complying with the terms of the approval, endorsement or authorisation.
  - Falsely stating that a product will only be available for a very limited time, or that it will only be available on particular terms for a very limited time, in order to elicit an immediate decision and deprive consumers of sufficient opportunity or time to make an informed choice.
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- Presenting rights given to consumers in law as a distinctive feature of the trader's offer
  - Using editorial content in the media to promote a product where a trader has paid for the promotion without making that clear in the content or by images or sounds clearly identifiable by the consumer (advertorial).
  - Making a materially inaccurate claim concerning the nature and extent of the risk to the personal security of the consumer or his family if the consumer does not purchase the product.
  - Passing on materially inaccurate information on market conditions or on the possibility of finding the product with the intention of inducing the consumer to acquire the product at conditions less favourable than normal market conditions.
  - Creating the impression that the consumer cannot leave the premises until a contract is formed.
  - Conducting personal visits to the consumer's home ignoring the consumer's request to leave or not to return except in circumstances and to the extent justified to enforce a contractual obligation.
  - Making persistent and unwanted solicitations by telephone, fax, e-mail or other remote media except in circumstances and to the extent justified<sup>14</sup> to enforce a contractual obligation.
  - Explicitly informing a consumer that if he does not buy the product or service, the trader's job or livelihood will be in jeopardy.

If you think you have been misled contact the Consumer Council [0800 121 6022] or Consumerline [0300 123 6262] for advice and information. You can obtain a guidance booklet by contacting the Office of Fair Trading on 0800 389 3158.

**76. What is a misleading selling practice? What can I do in the case of unfair practices?**

The Consumer Council has produced a Marketing Code of Conduct for energy suppliers, which has been adopted by all suppliers and an A-Z Consumer advice Handbook. To obtain a copy contact the Consumer Council. If you think you have been misled contact the Consumer Council [0800 121 6022] or Consumerline [0300 123 6262] for advice and information. You can also obtain a guidance booklet by contacting the Office of Fair Trading on 0800 389 3158.

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A misleading action occurs when a practice misleads through the information it contains, or its deceptive presentation, and causes or is likely to cause the consumer to take a different decision. For instance, if a trader falsely tells a consumer that his boiler cannot be repaired and he will need a new one, he will have committed a misleading action.

There are three types of misleading actions:

- misleading information generally. These are actions that mislead by:
    - containing false information OR deceiving or being likely to deceive the average consumer (even if the information they contain is factually correct),
    - and
    - the false information, or deception, relates to one or more pieces of information in a list in the legislation
    - and
    - the consumer takes, or is likely to take, a different decision as a result.
  - creating confusion with competitors' products that is, **if they**:
    - market a product in a way which creates confusion with any products, trade marks, trade names or other distinguishing marks of a competitor,
    - and
    - the consumer takes, or is likely to take, a different decision as a result
  - failing to honour firm and verifiable commitments made in a code of conduct where:
    - the trader has undertaken to be bound by a code of conduct (or code of practice), and indicates that he is bound by it in the commercial practice,
    - and
    - the trader fails to comply with a firm and verifiable commitment in that code,
    - and
    - the consumer takes, or is likely to take, a different decision as a result
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The Consumer Council has produced a Marketing Code of Conduct for energy suppliers, which has been adopted by all suppliers and an A-Z Consumer advice Handbook. To obtain a copy contact the Consumer Council. If you think you have been misled contact the Consumer Council [0800 121 6022] or Consumerline [0300 123 6262] for advice and information. You can also obtain a guidance booklet by contacting the Office of Fair Trading on 0800 389 3158.

**77. Who should I talk to if I think that I have been given false information, before signing the contract? After signing the contract?**

If you think you have been misled contact the Consumer Council [0800 121 6022] or Consumerline [0300 123 6262] for advice and information. You can obtain a guidance booklet by contacting the Office of Fair Trading on 0800 389 3158.

**78. Who should I talk to if I think that I have been switched against my will?**

Firstly talk to your original supplier. If this does not resolve the problem contact the Consumer Council [0800 121 6022].

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