



Advice NI Response to the Utility Regulator's consultation on Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme

Deadline: 11th May 2015

Advice NI welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Utility Regulator's consultation on Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme. **Section 1** includes background information on Advice NI and a general overview. **Section 2** then highlights our response to the consultation questions.

Section 1: Background & Overview

Advice NI is a membership organisation which exists to provide leadership, representation and support for independent advice organisations to facilitate the delivery of high quality, sustainable advice services. Advice NI provides its members with the capacity and tools to ensure the delivery of effective advice services. This includes: advice and information management systems, funding and planning, quality assurance support, NVQs in advice and guidance and social policy co-ordination.

Membership of Advice NI is normally for organisations that provide significant advice and information services to the public. Advice NI has over 68 member organisations operating throughout Northern Ireland, providing information and advocacy services to approximately 150,000 people each year dealing with over 270,000 enquires on an extensive range of matters including: debt, social security, housing, consumers and employment issues. We also deliver advice services directly (face to face, helpline, text and online) including HMRC Tax and Benefits service, Business Debtline and Debt Action NI.

Presently, Advice NI manages the Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment's money and debt programme. Debt Action NI has been operating since 2009. Since then the project has helped nearly 19,000 people deal with over £300 million in debt. Over 15,000 of these clients and nearly £210 million of debt were dealt with by the new integrated Debt Action NI service which has been operating across NI since August 2012. The new service offers a number of access points and integrates telephone, face to face and web based advice services. For further information, please visit www.adviceni.net or www.debtaction-ni.net.

Section 2: Response to Consultation

Advice NI has been a member of the Northern Ireland Fuel Poverty Coalition since 2010. We fully support the work of the Coalition and mirror the concerns of the lead partner National Energy Action (NEA). We welcome the extension of the current Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme. We believe it is right that the vast majority (80%) is spent on domestic customers, to improve the energy efficiency of properties, which will ultimately mean a reduction on their bills.

However, we do not support the proposed funding amendments outlined in the consultation. Currently an average domestic customer contributes £3.40 to the fund but the proposed amendments will increase this by almost three fold to £9.21. We believe that this would only exacerbate fuel poverty in Northern Ireland, especially for vulnerable low income families. According to government statistics 42% of Northern Ireland households are in fuel poverty¹. The same report highlights that the vast majority of these households have a low income. Therefore, putting more pressure on these households could lead increase self-disconnection, debt and ill health. NEA also highlighted through their work in the Whiterock² area that 46% of fuel poor households used more than the average domestic user, due to the need for secondary heating sources such as electric fires. Therefore, we would advocate that the current model continues.

¹ NIHE Housing conditions survey; 2011;
http://www.nihe.gov.uk/northern_ireland_house_condition_survey_main_report_2011.pdf

² NEA Report
<http://www.nea.org.uk/Resources/NEA/NEA%20Northern%20Ireland/Documents/AWWW%20Launch%20Report%20Final.pdf>

In 2013-14 our members dealt with 270,710 enquires and increasing such pressures on household's incomes may mean more look for support from the advice sector, at a time when the sector is facing substantial funding cuts. Advice services are essential and the benefits of seeking advice are highlighted in the *Why Advice Matters*³ and in the *Effectiveness of Debt Advice in the UK*⁴. Advice NI calls for better collaboration between government, suppliers and the advice sector to ensure that those who need support are dealt with quickly and seamlessly.

Advice NI echo's the current view of NEA, that until such time as the design of the HEaT programme is finalised and can clearly demonstrate it will benefit the fuel poor, it should not be held up as fuel poverty programme. Efforts should continue to introduce an Energy Efficiency Obligation but until then, we support NEA's view is that the Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme (NISEP) must continue until such time as a suitable alternative scheme is introduced which maintains a high percentage of ring-fenced activity deliberately targeted at low income households in fuel poverty.

Contact information on this consultation response:

Bob Stronge (Chief Executive)

Kevin Higgins (Head of Policy and Research)

Sinéad Campbell (Head of Money and Debt Services)

Advice NI

1 Rushfield Avenue

Belfast

BT7 3FP

Tel: 028 9064 5919

Fax: 028 9049 231

³ NIASC Why Advice Matters http://www.citizensadvice.co.uk/media/uploads/Why_Advice_Matters-NI_Advice_Consortium_June_2013.pdf

⁴ Money Advice Services Effectiveness of Debt Advice in the UK <https://53b86a9de6dd4673612f-c36ff983a9cc042683f46b699207946d.ssl.cf3.rackcdn.com/research-oct12-effectiveness-of-debt-advice-from-yougov.pdf>

Email: bob@adviceni.net

Email: kevin@adviceni.net

Email: sinead@adviceni.net

Website: www.adviceni.net

www.debtaction-ni.net