

European Commission

Energy Consumer Checklist

Prepared by the Utility Regulator and
The Consumer Council

The checklist is a collection of questions and subsequent answers that aim to provide practical information to consumers concerning their rights in relation to the energy sector.

This document is available for all consumers, but may be most relevant to domestic consumers.

- Section 1:** Information Obligations
- Section 2:** Contracts and Billing
- Section 3:** Prices, Tariffs and Monitoring
- Section 4:** Free Choice of Supplier
- Section 5:** Connect to Network
- Section 6:** Complaint Handling
- Section 7:** Consumer Representation
- Section 8:** Social Measures
- Section 9:** Unfair Commercial Practices

Section 1: Information obligations

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

As a domestic or business customer you can switch your electricity and/or your natural gas supplier, where other suppliers are available¹. This is an easy process which could potentially save you money.

A leaflet² has been produced regarding switching suppliers, which can be found on the Utility Regulator website³, or on The Consumer Council website⁴.

The Consumer Council also has a guide for energy users, Switch On⁵ which may help you choose the right supplier for you. Domestic consumers can also use their independent online energy price comparison tool⁶ to compare electricity and gas prices for every supplier in Northern Ireland, in order to get the best deal.

Once you have decided which supplier is best for you, contact them directly and they will assist you through the switching process.

Contact details for all suppliers and network operators can be found on the Utility Regulator website⁷, or you can contact The Consumer Council on 0800 121 6022, or via post at Consumer Council, 3rd Floor, Seatem House, 28 - 32 Alfred St, Belfast BT2 8EN.

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

This Consumer Checklist provides you with answers to many questions on your rights as an electricity and/or gas consumer. The Consumer Council can also provide further information on any specific queries.

Each electricity and gas supply company requires a licence to operate in the Northern Ireland energy market. There are conditions within these licences, in relation to consumers, that they must meet, along with additional requirements that are set out within Codes of Practice set by the Utility Regulator, which can be found on its website.

The electricity and gas supply companies are also required to have in place their own Codes of Practice with regard to consumer issues, such as handling complaints, disability, financial difficulty and prepayment/Pay As You Go meters. These are available on each supplier's website, no more than two clicks from their homepage.

Gas companies (network operators and suppliers) and NIE Networks must follow a set of Guaranteed Standards of Service (GSS). These GSS set out specific levels of service which individual consumers can expect from their energy companies. Gas companies are required to have in place a Notice of Rights, providing consumers with details of how to access compensation payments should the standard of service they receive be less than that set by the Utility Regulator.

You can also refer to the terms and conditions of your 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?

Business customers of gas and electricity should contact their supplier directly for information.

¹ The Utility Regulator has worked hard to encourage competition in both the domestic electricity and gas markets. A number of new suppliers have already entered the energy market and the Utility Regulator will continue to promote competition to ensure choice for consumers.

² <https://www.uregni.gov.uk/quick-guides>

³ <https://www.uregni.gov.uk/>

⁴ <http://www.consumerCouncil.org.uk/publications/utility-regulator-find-out-how-to-switch/>

⁵ http://www.consumerCouncil.org.uk/filestore/documents/38978_CC_Switch_on_Electricity_and_Gas.pdf

⁶ <http://www.consumerCouncil.org.uk/energy/energy-price-comparison>

⁷ <https://www.uregni.gov.uk/>

Domestic customers

All electricity and gas suppliers must offer a range of payment methods, with at least the following three methods for domestic customers to choose from:

- standard credit in arrears,
- direct debit; and
- prepayment/Pay As You Go meter.*

*No additional charge is applied for the installation of a prepayment/Pay As You Go meter. Your energy supplier will provide you with more information on your choices.

There may, however, be a charge applied to change from prepayment/Pay As You Go meter to another form of payment. Check this with your supplier.

Some suppliers offer other ways to pay. Ask your supplier, or a supplier you are considering switching to, to see what options they offer.

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

The Consumer Council has an energy price comparison tool⁸ on their website which domestic consumers can use to compare electricity and gas prices for every supplier in Northern Ireland, this may help you decide on the best option for you.

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

If you pay by standard credit in arrears, or by monthly/quarterly direct debit you will find the amount of electricity or gas you use on your bill.

Prepayment/Pay As You Go meter customers should be able to find this information from their meter – if you do not know how to do this please contact your current electricity or gas supplier, or check the supplier's Code of

Practice on Services for Prepayment Meter Customers⁹. The annual statement that you now receive will also provide this information.

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

You will also need to find out 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;
- Any introductory offers;
- An expiry date of introductory offers, incentives or loyalty payments 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 then work out what your annual bill would be with a different supplier using The Consumer Council's energy price comparison tool, or, if you wish, use the following calculation:

Annual use x cost per kWh offered + any additional charge (such as 'standing charge', and ensure you add a full year's charge as these can often be shown as quarterly charges).

5. What information should be provided on my bill?

As outlined in question 2, each electricity and gas supply company are required to meet conditions set out within the Code of Practice on Bills and Statements¹⁰, set by Utility Regulator.

⁸ <http://www.consumerCouncil.org.uk/energy/price-comparison/>

⁹ This is called Code of Practice for Prepayment Consumers in the Gas Supply Licence. While some licences may refer to consumers rather than customers, for the purposes of this paper, consumers will be taken to have the same meaning as customers.

¹⁰ <https://www.uregni.gov.uk/sites/uregni/files/media-files/2017-07-05%20FINAL%20domestic%20bills%20and%20statements%20CLEAN%20-%20Annex%203.pdf>

Business customers should refer to the Code of Practice on Bills and Statements for business customers¹¹ for the information that should be included within their bills.

A domestic customer's bill should include the following information:

- The name and address of the supplier.
- The meter number i.e. the Meter Point Registration Number (MPRN) for electricity, Supply Meter Point Number (SMPN) for gas, applicable to the customer/customer's premises.
- The following information about the tariff on which the customer is being supplied:
 - Full name of tariff;
 - the applicable unit rate, expressed in pence per kWh;
 - the details of any discount that applies to the tariff (when compared to the supplier's standard tariff)
 - a statement to highlight to the customer that there may be cheaper tariff options available.
- The total charges applicable for the period of the bill or statement, containing a breakdown to include:
 - any applicable standing charges
 - total charges exclusive of VAT
 - total charges including VAT; and
 - any other charges (if applicable).
- The amount of electricity or gas that has been used by the customer for the current billing period and for the same period for the previous year (if with the same supplier).
- Electricity suppliers will include information on the environmental impact of the fuel they use to generate electricity.
- Information about any further action required following receipt of the bill or statement, for example, if an outstanding amount is to be paid, details of how much is to be paid and the date of payment.
- A statement to advise customers that are having difficulty paying their gas or electricity to contact them immediately for help and guidance.

- Information about the Code of Practice which sets out the services, advice and assistance it provides to customers who may be having difficulty in paying for their electricity or gas.
- A reminder that other suppliers are available, and information about where the customer can obtain further information about changing supplier.
- Information about customer's rights in relation to complaints and contact details for The Consumer Council.
- Information about the Energy Consumer checklist and its availability on the supplier's website, as well as in hard copy to the customer on request, and free of charge.
- Contact details of at least one organisation that provides information or assistance to consumers on improving energy efficiency.
- Gas supply companies will also include the website address of the Supplier's Notice of Rights (referenced in question 2 above) and details on how the customer can request a printed copy of this.

If your bill is estimated you can register a self-read. Contact your supplier for further information.

For Prepayment/Pay As You Go meter customers, the annual statement will provide details of the number and total value of the prepayments made in each calendar month of the statement period.

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

Your energy supplier is required to give you information and advice to help you use your electricity or gas more efficiently, and on renewables. Each supplier has a Code of Practice on using electricity/gas efficiently and you should contact them and request a copy.

Alternative energy advice is also available on the NI Direct government website www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/energy-wise

¹¹ <https://www.uregni.gov.uk/sites/uregni/files/media-files/2017-07-05%20FINAL%20non-domestic%20bills%20and%20statements%20CLEAN%20-%20Annex%205.pdf>

The Consumer Council's Switch On¹² leaflet contains energy efficiency information. Download it from their website or contact them on 0800 121 6022 for a free copy.

The NI Energy Advice Line service offers free comprehensive advice and support on how to save energy in the home and on assistance available.

NIHE - NI Energy Advice Line: 0800 111 44 55
www.nihe.gov.uk/Community/NI-Energy-Advice

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 and electricity.

To contact The Consumer Council call free on 0800 121 6022, email contact@consumercouncil.org.uk or visit www.consumercouncil.org.uk

The Utility Regulator has a duty to protect the interests of electricity and gas consumers in Northern Ireland. For more detail about how it looks after consumers' interests please see its corporate plan¹³, its forward work plan¹⁴, and its annual report¹⁵.

For general consumer advice, Consumerline is Northern Ireland Trading Standards Service's 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. Alternatively, you can register your complaint online.

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

Electricity suppliers are required to inform all customers, (including Prepayment/Pay as You Go meter customers), on, or with bills, and in promotional materials, about the fuel they use to generate electricity (known as the fuel mix).

There will be a table on your electricity bill showing the fuel used to generate the electricity your supplier has sold in the previous year. This calculation is checked by the Utility Regulator and a report¹⁶ is produced and put on the website.

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

Utility Regulator,
Queens House,
14 Queen Street,
Belfast, BT1 6ED
Telephone: +44 (0) 28 9031 1575
Fax: +44 (0) 28 9031 1740
Email: info@uregni.gov.uk

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

Electricity

Northern Ireland Electricity Networks (NIE Networks) owns and manages the electricity network – wires, pylons and meters. Those companies who supply electricity (suppliers) pay NIE Networks a fee to transport electricity, and then sell it straight to the consumer. It doesn't matter who your supplier is, NIE Networks is responsible for making sure the electricity reaches your home.

A full list of electricity suppliers in Northern Ireland can be found on the Utility Regulator website, or you can contact The Consumer Council on 0800 121 6022.

Natural Gas

The Northern Ireland natural gas network has three network operators who operate in separate distribution areas as detailed below:

¹² http://www.consumercouncil.org.uk/filestore/documents/38978_CC_Switch_on_Electricity_and_Gas.pdf

¹³ <https://www.uregni.gov.uk/publications/corporate-strategy-2014-2019>

¹⁴ <https://www.uregni.gov.uk/publications/20162017-forward-work-programme>

¹⁵ <https://www.uregni.gov.uk/publications/utility-regulator-annual-report-2015-2016>

¹⁶ <https://www.uregni.gov.uk/publications/fuel-mix-disclosure-2016>

- firmus energy (Distribution) Ltd (from the North West through the Central region to the Southern areas of Northern Ireland),
- Phoenix Natural Gas (mainly the Greater Belfast, East Down and Larne areas), and
- SGN Natural Gas (Distribution) in the West of Northern Ireland.

Each network operator owns and manages the natural gas network in their distribution area. Those companies who supply gas (suppliers) pay the relevant network operators a fee to transport natural gas, and then sell it straight to the consumer. Although a network operator is responsible for making sure the natural gas reaches your home it is the responsibility of your gas supplier to bill you for the gas you use.

A full list of natural gas suppliers in Northern Ireland and the areas in which they operate can be found on the Utility Regulator website, or you can contact the Consumer Council on 0800 121 6022.

New areas are being connected to a gas supply on a regular basis. To check if gas is available where you live, contact your network operator:

- Firmus energy (Distribution) Ltd at <http://www.firmusenergy.co.uk> or telephone 0800 032 4567, or
- Phoenix Natural Gas Ltd at <http://www.phoenixnaturalgas.com> or telephone 03454 55 55 55, or
- SGN Natural Gas (Distribution) <https://www.sgn.co.uk/> or telephone 0800 912 1700.

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 online. A weekly survey of home heating oil prices is available on The Consumer Council website.

Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG)

Often referred to as bottled gas, this is available

in bottles/tanks/cylinders. 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

Flogas

Tel: 028 9073 2611

Fax: 028 9073 2020

E-mail: info@flogasni.com

Web: 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 your current electricity supplier.

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 inform all customers about the fuel they use to generate electricity.

There will be a table on your electricity bill showing the fuel used to generate the electricity your supplier has sold in the previous year.

This calculation is checked by the Utility Regulator and a report¹⁷ is produced and put on their website.

¹⁷ <https://www.uregni.gov.uk/publications/fuel-mix-disclosure-2016>

Section 2: Contracts and Billing

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

Details of all the information that should be included with your bill are provided at Question 5 on pages 5-7.

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 at 0800 121 6022 or the Utility Regulator at 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 pay by standard credit in arrears, or by monthly/quarterly direct debit you will find information about your electricity or gas use on your bill.

If you have a prepayment/Pay As You Go meter you can obtain this information directly from your meter. Your supplier's Code of Practice on Prepayment Services will explain how to do this.

Prepayment/Pay as you Go meter customers will also receive an annual statement which will tell you the amount of electricity or gas you have used over 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 your 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).
- Are you 'locked-in' to this product for a fixed period? How much will it cost to end the contract before this time?

- Are prices fixed for a specific period?
- Is there an introductory offer? How long will it last? What happens when it expires? Is there a charge for leaving before the offer expires?
- Details of the standard tariffs that will apply after the introductory offers end.
- Are there any extra costs involved, for example, paying a security deposit or replacing lost/damaged top-up cards for prepayment/Pay As You Go meters?
- Details of the length of time you have to cancel if you change your mind about switching (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 you have to read your own meter and if so are there any penalties for not reading it in time?
- Does the offer require you to manage your account online?
- Domestic customers should ask how you can pay. Is there discount or any additional charge if you choose to pay:
 - by standard credit in arrears?,
 - by prepayment/Pay As You Go meter?
 - by direct debit?
- What additional services can you offer? For example, where I need help in specific circumstances or require adjustments for my needs.
- What range of methods is available for buying credit for prepayment/Pay As You Go meters?
- Where can I buy credit for prepayment/Pay As You Go meters?
- Ask for a copy of the contract or Terms and Conditions which will specify your unit rate. Always read and make sure you understand the small print before signing an agreement.
- Is there a standing charge that all customers must pay regardless of how much gas or electricity they use?
- Is there a minimum charge which all customers have to pay even if you use very little gas or electricity?
- Any other charges that may apply.

A leaflet¹⁸ has been produced regarding switching suppliers, which can be found on the Utility Regulator website¹⁹, or on The Consumer Council website²⁰.

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

All suppliers provide information on domestic tariffs on their websites. Business customers should contact suppliers directly for available tariffs or available products.

The Consumer Council also provides information on their website, including an energy information leaflet, Switch On and, for domestic consumers, an independent online energy price comparison tool.

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. It is important to take the time to carefully read through these before signing. Ask the supplier to give you more time, if you need it, to do this. Also, your supplier must highlight the following information before you sign up to a new contract:

- The charges for your energy supply.
- If you need to use a prepayment/Pay As You Go meter.
- Any requirement for a security deposit (Domestic customers only).
- The duration of the contract.
- Your rights to end the contract, including any obligation to pay a termination fee, or the circumstances in which it will end.
- Any other term that may reasonably be considered to significantly affect the evaluation of the contract by the customer.

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.

Domestic customers have up to 10 working days to change their mind after signing the contract, this is known as the cooling off period.

If you lose your contract you can request a copy from your supplier. Suppliers will also have a full set of Terms and Conditions on their websites.

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?

Please refer to Question 19 for a combined answer.

18. Where can I find out about my supplier's own conditions for cancellation?

Please refer to Question 19 for a combined answer.

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

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

As a domestic consumer, you will usually have an ongoing contract (known as an 'evergreen' contract) under which you will continue to receive your energy supply.

If you are considering cancelling your contract, for any of the above reasons, it is important to take time to carefully read the terms and conditions within your contract, as these will provide details of the different requirements your supplier will have if you wish to cancel. This may involve a set period of notice you need to give your supplier, or possible charges for leaving a fixed term contract before it expires, for example.

Customers on a fixed term contract, with a promotional offer, for example, need to be

¹⁸ <https://www.uregni.gov.uk/sites/uregni/files/media-files/2017%20Switching%20Leaflet.pdf>

¹⁹ <https://www.uregni.gov.uk/>

²⁰ <http://www.consumerCouncil.org.uk/publications/ulicity-regulator-find-out-how-to-switch/>

aware that the supplier is under no obligation to provide those same terms and conditions if they leave the contract before it expires.

In the case of a price change for domestic consumers, your electricity or gas supplier must give you at least 21 days advanced notice of any proposed changes, and include that you have the right to cancel the contract, and how to do this.

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

Prepayment/Pay As You Go meter customers

If you are a Prepayment/Pay As You Go customer and you move home, make sure to inform the supplier of your new property; otherwise you may be paying debt of a previous resident.

Please refer to Question 20 for the answer relating to moving to other premises.

If you need any further advice, contact

The Consumer Council on 0800 121 6022.

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 your previous 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. Equally, if you were in credit, any money due from your supplier will be sent to you within 6 weeks.

Moving

If you are moving you need to inform your supplier and give them the moving date, a closing meter read and your new address. 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 to ensure that you tell your supplier you are moving address as, if you do not inform them, you may still be considered responsible for energy use at your old address and receive bills for this, even if you have moved out.

Prepayment/Pay As You Go meter Customers

If you are a prepayment/Pay as You Go meter customer considering moving home, it is important to ensure you use any credit you may have in your meter before you move, as this will not be refunded to you. It is also important that if you are moving home, and are currently repaying debt to a supplier that you arrange with them how this will be paid back.

If you are a prepayment/Pay As You Go meter customer and switch suppliers, you will keep any credit within your meter, and this will transfer with you to any new supplier.

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 is required to develop a Code of Practice detailing its complaints procedure, in which complaints are intended to be processed and resolved within three months. The Code must be advertised on your supplier's website and marketing materials. Details of how to complain must be on your bill. You can also ask your supplier for a copy, free of charge.

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?

As stated in question 2, energy companies have conditions within their licence, relating to the minimum levels of service you should receive.

The Guaranteed Standards of Service (GSS) set out specific levels of service which individual consumers can expect from their energy companies. If they fail to meet the appropriate standard you may be entitled to receive a fixed financial amount. Currently, this scheme applies to all gas companies (network operators and suppliers) as well as NIE Networks.

The details of the GSS scheme for NIE Networks and all gas companies are available on their individual websites. The scheme covers problems like an interruption to your supply.

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?

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

If you are a domestic customer your supplier must:

- Work with you to produce a realistic payment plan which takes account of your ability to pay;
- Offer you a prepayment/Pay as You Go meter to help you budget for electricity or gas;
- If you already have a prepayment/Pay As You Go meter, take steps to help you avoid self-disconnection.

Your supplier can also offer you advice on using gas or electricity more efficiently to help you reduce your bills.

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

DebtAdviceNI: Freephone 0800 043 0550

Advice NI: 028 9064 5919

Citizens Advice: 028 9023 1120

StepChange : Freephone 0800 138 1111

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.

Section 3: Prices, Tariffs and Monitoring

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

Your bill must contain clear and full information of the total cost you will be charged to ensure it is easy to compare to other energy suppliers.

The following must be included:

- The price – this is the amount you pay for your energy, which must be displayed in pence per kWh.
- Additional Charges - this is any additional cost, such as a 'standing charge' (as explained in question 4).
- Tariff – this is the pricing system you are currently on with your chosen supplier.

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

Your bill should clearly show you the units of energy used, the price you are charged per unit, and standing charges where applicable. Any levies or taxes (such as VAT) must also be clearly set out.

Suppliers must also identify the details of any discount or premium that is being applied to a charging system compared to their standard tariff and the length of the discount period.

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.

The Consumer Council will also provide you with free and independent advice, on 0800 121 6022.

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. If a security deposit is required for a domestic customer it must not exceed the average three month use for electricity or gas customers. The security deposit must be returned to the customer after one year if payments are up to date²¹.

Details of electricity connection charges, which are payable to NIE Networks (the network operator) are available at:
<http://www.nienetworks.co.uk>

Details of how you can obtain a connection to the natural gas network, and associated charges that may be payable to the network operator, can be found at
<http://www.firmusenergy.co.uk> and
<http://www.phoenixnaturalgas.com> and
<https://www.sgn.co.uk/>

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. Question 4 on page 4 provides further information on the detail you would require to compare offers.

Ensure that any standing or additional charges are taken into account when assessing the overall cost of the contract. Suppliers must show their tariffs in pence per kWh. This ensures that customers are provided with clear and full information which is easy to compare to other energy suppliers.

The Consumer Council also provides information on their website.

30. Where can I access an electronic price calculator?

Please refer to Question 32 for a combined answer.

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

Please refer to Question 32 for a combined answer.

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

The Consumer Council has an energy price comparison tool²² on their website. Domestic consumers can use this tool to compare electricity and gas prices for every supplier in Northern Ireland, in order to get the best deal.

33. What payment options are open to me?

Business customers of gas and electricity should contact their supplier directly for information.

Domestic customers

All electricity and gas suppliers must offer a range of payment methods, with at least the following three methods for domestic customers to choose from:-

- standard credit in arrears,
- direct debit, and
- prepayment/Pay As You Go meter.*

*No additional charge is applied for the installation of a prepayment/Pay As You Go meter. Your energy supplier will provide you with more information on your choices.

There may, however, be a charge applied to change from prepayment/Pay As You Go meter to another form of payment. Check this with your supplier.

Some suppliers offer other ways to pay. Ask your supplier, or a supplier you are considering switching to, to see what options they offer.

²¹ As per electricity and gas supply licence conditions (27A and 2.22 respectively), any security deposit given by a domestic customer shall be repaid within 28 days, where, in the previous 12 months, they have paid all charges for the supply of gas or electricity demanded from them within 28 days of each written demand made.

²² <http://www.consumerCouncil.org.uk/energy/electricity-gas-price-comparison/>

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?

In electricity, Power NI tariffs for domestic customers are regulated by the Utility Regulator, as they have the largest market share of the domestic market. A briefing²³ about the latest tariff review has been published on the Utility Regulator website.

In gas, the prices of SSE Airtricity Gas Supply Limited and firmus energy (Supply) Ltd are also regulated by the Utility Regulator as they both have the largest domestic market share in the areas in which they operate. Details are on their website at: www.airtricitygasni.com and www.firmusenergy.co.uk

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 Networks (the network operator) is responsible for electricity metering in Northern Ireland; you can contact them on 03457 643 643.

To find out if your property can get connected to the natural gas network contact your network operator (full details are provided at question 9). If natural gas is available in your area, your network operator will be able to discuss the connection arrangements.

If you are already a gas customer looking to discuss your current meter, contact your supplier. You will be supplied with a meter appropriate to the payment method agreed with your supplier.

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?

Suppliers must give all customers, including prepayment/Pay As You Go meter customers,

an annual update on your energy use. If you have been with your supplier for 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 Networks is responsible for reading your electricity meter, including 'prepayment/Pay As You Go meters', regardless of which supplier you choose. Meters are usually read every 3 months. They will pass on your meter reading to your supplier so the supplier can send you a bill. Switching supplier will not affect your meter reading cycle.

If you are out when NIE Networks calls to read your meter you can read your meter yourself and telephone them on 08456 093030, email at meter.reading@nie.co.uk or through the website: <http://www.nie.co.uk>

Gas

Each gas supply company is responsible for meter reading.

Depending on the payment method that you choose, the supplier may offer a discount on your bill, for example, for online billing and/ or self reads. 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 pattern of energy use. If this is the case, take an actual meter reading and provide it to your supplier so they can produce a more accurate bill. This will be marked as an estimated read on your 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

²³ <https://www.uregni.gov.uk/sites/uregni/files/media-files/Electricity%20Tariff%20Briefing%20Paper%20-%20August%202017.pdf>

of price changes and state where you can get up to date information on prices.

Other contracts are fixed-term, where you agree to pay a particular price for a specific fixed period. This is regardless of whether there is any increase or decrease to the standard price. 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 domestic consumers at least 21 days advanced notice of any proposed change to contracts including a change of price.

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

For customers on a fixed term contract, you must be informed at least 28 days, but no longer than 42 days, in advance of the expiry date of that fixed term period, and the details of the standard 'evergreen' tariff to which you will revert.

Section 4: Free Choice of Supplier

40. Who are the active suppliers in my area?

Contact details for all electricity and gas suppliers and network operators can be found on the Utility Regulator's website, or you can contact The Consumer Council on 0800 121 6022.

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

If you are considering cancelling your contract it is important to take time to carefully read the terms and conditions within your contract, as these will provide details of the different requirements your supplier will have if you wish

to cancel. This may involve a set period of notice you need to give your supplier, or possible charges for leaving a fixed term contract before it expires, for example.

If you decide to switch, 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's Switch On²⁴ leaflet provides information on energy contracts and switching. You can download a copy or call 0800 121 6262 for a free copy or advice.

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

As stated in question 17 on page 16, you should check the Terms and Conditions of your contract or contact your supplier for advice.

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 start the switching process and deal with the paperwork. Domestic consumers have 10 working days cooling off period when they can cancel the switch. The switch should be completed within 15 working days after the end of the cooling off period.

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.

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

If you are a domestic customer there are generally no reasons that would stop you

²⁴ http://www.consumer council.org.uk/filestore/documents/38978_CC_Switch_on_Electricity_and_Gas.pdf

switching supplier. However, if you are in debt, there may be some limitations. Contact the supplier you wish to switch to, in order to discuss.

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

Your supplier cannot penalise you for switching unless your contract states, within the terms and conditions, that there is a penalty for cancelling your contract early. It is therefore important to carefully read the terms and conditions before signing any contract.

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, which you should read carefully before signing.

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

The length of a contract is at the discretion of each supplier, there is no maximum period specified.

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 to your satisfaction then contact The Consumer Council who may be able to assist you in resolving the issue.

Section 5: Connection to Network

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

Electricity

To get a new electricity connection contact NIE Networks (the network operator) and complete an application form. You can find this on their website at www.nienetworks.co.uk or contact them on 03457 643643 to request a form.

From 28th March 2018, once you receive a connection offer, you will then have a choice of who designs and builds your connection. You can find out more at <http://www.nie.co.uk>

Natural Gas

To check if gas is available in your area contact the relevant network operator in your area (see map on page 10) – firmus energy (Distribution) Ltd (from the North West through the Central region to the Southern areas of Northern Ireland), Phoenix Natural Gas (mainly the Greater Belfast, East Down and Larne areas), or SGN Natural Gas (Distribution) Ltd in the West of Northern Ireland. New areas are being connected to a gas supply on a regular basis, details can be found by contacting the network operators as follows:-

- <http://www.firmusenergy.co.uk> or telephone 0800 032 4567, or
- <http://www.phoenixnaturalgas.com> or telephone 03454 55 55 55, or
- <https://www.sgn.co.uk/> or telephone 0800 912 1700

If natural gas is available to your property, the relevant network operator will provide further information on the connection process and available suppliers.

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 with the relevant network operator in your area (full details are provided in question 9). This is a contract for the connection, not for the supply of gas or electricity.

For electricity, you will also enter into a contract with your chosen supplier.

For new domestic gas connections, you will initially be allocated a supplier for a minimum of 15 working days. After your supply begins you have the choice to switch supplier, where other suppliers are available.

You will not necessarily sign your name to a written contract. For example, you may switch supplier online 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 supplier's 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 as follows:

Electricity

Contact NIE Networks on 03457 643 643 or customercontact@nienetworks.co.uk

Natural Gas

Contact the network operator in your area (see map on page 10):-

- Firmus energy (Distribution) Ltd at <http://www.firmusenergy.co.uk> or telephone 0800 032 4567, or
- Phoenix Natural Gas Ltd at <http://www.phoenixnaturalgas.com> or telephone 03454 55 55 55, or
- SGN Natural Gas (Distribution) at <https://www.sgn.co.uk> or telephone 0800 912 1700.

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?

For domestic customers, if your property is already connected to the relevant electricity or gas network, all suppliers available in your area must offer to enter into a contract with you, provided you are willing to accept their relevant Terms and Conditions.

If you do not currently have a connection please contact the network operator as detailed in question 52 above.

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

Yes. For electricity the property owner will have to sign an application with NIE Networks (the network operator). For natural gas the property owner will have to sign an application with the

relevant network operator (as detailed in question 52).

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 Networks, the network operator, to inform them of the fault – 03457 643 643

If your gas supply is interrupted, you should contact your supplier.

If you smell gas, you must contact the 24-hour 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 an interruption in supply.

Contact your supplier first; if the supplier does not deal with it to your satisfaction then contact The Consumer Council who may be able to assist you in resolving the issue. Call them on 0800 121 6022 or email at complaints@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 pay as you go 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:

DebtAdviceNI: Freephone 0800 043 0550

Advice NI: 028 9064 5919

Citizens Advice: 028 9023 1120

StepChange : Freephone 0800 138 1111

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

Electricity

In electricity, if your supplier goes out of business you will automatically become a customer with Power NI, as Power NI is, what is referred to as, the Supplier of Last Resort [SOLR] for Northern Ireland. 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 after 20 working days; the SOLR arrangements are in place to ensure you have a continuous supply.

Gas

Similar arrangements are being put in place for gas, to identify the gas SOLR, to ensure you have a continuous supply of gas should a supplier go out of business. Gas customers can contact The Consumer Council to find out who the SOLR is in their gas network area.

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?

For electricity, information will be available from NIE Networks (the electricity network operator) on their website, or by calling 03457 643 643.

For gas, information will be available from your network operator on their website, or by calling them (full details provided in question 52).

If you smell gas, you must contact the 24-hour Gas Emergency Service on 0800 002 001.

If the crisis is national then, depending on its nature, the Department for the Economy will ensure the local media is kept informed.

The NIE Networks Critical Care Register is a list of those consumers who are dependent on life supporting electrical equipment. These consumers are given priority, as regards to the provision of information, during planned or unplanned interruptions to supply. You can find out more about the register on their website, or call 03457 643 643.

Your electricity and gas supplier will also provide information on their website.

Section 6: Complaint Handling

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

As explained in question 2 on page 2, the electricity and gas supply companies are required to have in place their own Code of Practice with regard handling complaints. These are available on each supplier's website, no more than two clicks from their homepage.

They will also provide details on how to access their complaints procedure on bills and marketing materials.

Suppliers must resolve your complaint within three months. If you have followed their complaints process and remain dissatisfied The Consumer Council can assist with your complaint. Call them on 0800 121 6022 or email contact@consumercouncil.org.uk

61. Does my supplier make use of an ombudsman?

There is currently no energy ombudsman scheme in Northern Ireland. Suppliers must resolve your complaint within three months. If you have followed the complaints procedure and remain dissatisfied The Consumer Council can assist with your complaint.

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 followed your supplier/network operator's complaints procedure and are dissatisfied with the outcome The Consumer Council can 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?

Question 2 on page 2 provides information on your rights as an energy customer. For independent advice on your rights and more information on a particular issue, please contact The Consumer Council on 0800 121 6022.

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 its website²⁵.

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 and electricity. For further information phone 0800 121 6022 or see their website²⁶.

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 suppliers 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; its Corporate Plan²⁷ outlines its duties and how it achieves them, identifying strategic themes and priorities.

The Forward Work Plan²⁸ outlines what it will do each year. Both these documents are publicly consulted upon in order to listen to the views of its stakeholders including the electricity and gas industries and consumer and political representatives.

The Annual Report²⁹ outlines what it has achieved over the year.

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

²⁵ <http://www.uregni.gov.uk>

²⁶ <http://www.consumerCouncil.org.uk>

²⁷ <https://www.uregni.gov.uk/publications/corporate-strategy-2014-2019>

²⁸ <https://www.uregni.gov.uk/publications/20162017-forward-work-programme>

²⁹ <https://www.uregni.gov.uk/publications/utility-regulator-annual-report-2015-2016>

without contacting your supplier may affect your credit rating and this may result in disconnection from your supply or the installation of a prepayment/ Pay As You Go meter.

For further information check your supplier's Code of Practice on payment of bills.

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 Pay As You Go meter. You may also wish to seek independent advice on dealing with debt.

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

DebtAdviceNI: Freephone 0800 043 0550
Advice NI: 028 9064 5919
Citizens Advice: 028 9023 1120
StepChange : Freephone 0800 138 1111

The Consumer Council has produced a budget planner to help consumers manage their money. You can download a copy of this budget planner at www.consumerCouncil.org.uk.

69. What do I do if I am disconnected?

Please contact your electricity or gas supplier. The advice organisations listed in question 68 on page 37 can also help.

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?

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.

The level and type of services available depends upon your circumstances. For example, additional services may be offered if any of the following apply to you:

- of pensionable age
- chronically sick
- disabled
- on low income; or
- live in a rural area (electricity consumers).

NIE Networks Ltd have a Critical Care Register³⁰ which provides additional services for customers who are dependent on life supporting electrical equipment.

Electricity and gas suppliers in Northern Ireland maintain customer care registers and offer a range of free additional services for those customers mentioned in the list above.

To find out more about these services contact your supplier.

If your supplier is unable to help, you should contact The Consumer Council on 0800 121 6022 or contact@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. The Utility Regulator would advise you to seek assistance from an advice centre or consumer 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:

DebtAdviceNI: Freephone 0800 043 0550
Advice NI: 028 9064 5919
Citizens Advice: 028 9023 1120
StepChange: Freephone 0800 138 1111

The Consumer Council has produced a budget planner to help consumers manage their money. You can download a copy of this budget planner at www.consumerCouncil.org.uk

³⁰ <http://www.nienetworks.co.uk/help-advice/Vulnerable-customers/Critical-care-register>

The NI Energy Advice Line service offers free comprehensive advice and support on how to save energy in the home and on assistance available.

NIHE - NI Energy Advice Line: 0800 111 44 55
www.nihe.gov.uk/Community/NI-Energy-Advice

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 may reduce your use. Each supplier has a Code of Practice on using electricity / gas efficiently and you should contact them and request a copy.

Alternative energy advice is also available on the NI Direct government web site <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/energy-wise>

The Consumer Council's Switch On leaflet contains energy efficiency information. Download it from their website or contact them on 0800 121 6022 for a free copy.

The NI Energy Advice Line service offers free comprehensive advice and support on how to save energy in the home and on assistance available.

NIHE - NI Energy Advice Line: 0800 111 44 55
www.nihe.gov.uk/Community/NI-Energy-Advice

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, the Utility Regulator would advise you to seek assistance from an advice centre or consumer organisation relevant to your circumstances. Alternatively, contact your supplier who will tell you about other sources of help and assistance.

Electricity and gas 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 <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/energy-wise>

The Consumer Council's Switch On leaflet contains energy efficiency information. Download it from their website or contact them on 0800 121 6022 for a free copy.

The NI Energy Advice Line service offers free comprehensive advice and support on how to save energy in the home and on assistance available.

NIHE - NI Energy Advice Line: 0800 111 44 55
www.nihe.gov.uk/Community/NI-Energy-Advice

Section 9: Unfair Commercial Practices

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

In order to understand an unfair commercial practice, please contact The Consumer Council on 0800 121 6022.

You can also contact Trading Standards' consumer helpline, Consumerline, on 0300 123 62 62 for advice, or visit the unfair trading section on their website.

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

The Utility Regulator has produced a Code of Practice relating to Marketing³¹. This contains requirements that must be adopted by all suppliers. The Consumer Council have also produced an A-Z Consumer Advice Handbook, to request a copy contact The Consumer Council on 0800 121 6022.

In order to understand misleading selling practices, contact The Consumer Council on 0800 121 6022.

You can also contact Trading Standards' consumer helpline, Consumerline, on 0300 123 62 62 for advice, or visit the unfair trading section on their website.

³¹ <https://www.uregni.gov.uk/publications/marketing-code-practice-domestic-customers>

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 on 0800 121 6022.

You can also contact Trading Standards' consumer helpline, Consumerline, on 0300 123 62 62 for advice.

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 you may wish to contact The Consumer Council on 0800 121 6022. You can also report this matter to Trading Standards' consumer helpline, Consumerline, on 0300 123 62 62.