

# switch on

a guide for energy users



## Home Heating Oil

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Energy costs are one of the biggest concerns for Northern Ireland consumers. We have prepared this guide to help consumers get the best service from their home heating oil distributor and save money.

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# 1. Northern Ireland Oil Federation Customer Charter

The Consumer Council has worked with the Northern Ireland Oil Federation (NIOF) to develop their Customer Charter. The charter provides guaranteed service standards for consumers who purchase from an NIOF member and a free complaints service with the Consumer Council. It includes the following areas:

- Customer care and complaint procedures;
- Payment options;
- Using energy efficiently; and
- Special advice for vulnerable consumers.

The NIOF Customer Charter is available on the NIOF website at: [www.nioil.com](http://www.nioil.com)



## Customer Charter

## 2. Best Value

### What you need to know when buying oil:

- The Consumer Council carries out a survey of heating oil prices across Northern Ireland every week. This is available at [www.consumercouncil.org.uk](http://www.consumercouncil.org.uk).
- Buy the largest amount you can afford – the larger the refill you buy the less you pay per litre of heating oil.
- Avoid using emergency oil drums – these are for emergency situations (run out) only. A 20 litre emergency drum could cost 65% more per litre than the cost of the average oil refill.
- Only sign up to a payment scheme such as direct debit if it suits your needs – discuss your heating requirement with your distributor before signing up.
- Prices quoted over the phone and on company websites must be accurate and reflect the price paid at the point of delivery. A quote over the phone or online is a contract unless otherwise stated, and is therefore legally binding.
- Price quotes should include VAT at the current rate (5%).

The price you pay for your heating oil is important, but you should also consider the following:

- Ask your oil distributor if they are a NIOF member - their Customer Charter provides guaranteed standards of service including a free complaints service with the Consumer Council.
- Reliability of service, punctuality of delivery, payment terms and offers (discount on boiler service etc.).
- Customer loyalty – a regular customer may receive preferential treatment for example if supplies come under pressure due to severe weather.

**Top  
Tip!**



**Check the Consumer Council's weekly  
online oil survey before ordering your oil  
[www.consumercouncil.org.uk](http://www.consumercouncil.org.uk)**

## 3. Payment Methods

### What you need to know about the different ways of paying for oil

- **Oil Buying clubs** - Communities and local groups can club together and allow distributors to bid or make an offer on the cheapest price. This can allow individual customers to buy smaller amounts at a cheaper price. To find out more about oil buying clubs or to see if there is one operating in your area, contact Bryson Energy on 0800 1422 865 (See Section 9: Useful Contacts).
- **PayPoint** - The Northern Ireland Oil Federation in partnership with PayPoint has recently introduced a pre-payment scheme for home heating oil. You can now make regular payments throughout the year at your local PayPoint store instead of lump sum payments at the time of delivery to your chosen distributor (not all distributors are in this scheme). Each distributor participating in the scheme will issue the customer with a swipe card featuring the PayPoint logo. The customer can then pre-pay towards their oil supply by visiting stores displaying the PayPoint logo. Before you order oil from your distributor, contact them to see how much credit is in your account.
- **Oil Stamp Saving Schemes** - Many local Councils run oil stamp saving schemes. Oil savings cards can be bought at your convenience to spread the cost of oil. They can be obtained from participating retailers who will sell £5 oil savings stamps that you stick to the card and which can hold up to 30 stamps. Your local Council will provide you with a list of distributors where stamps are accepted as payment. If they are lost you won't get your money back and you cannot exchange the stamps for anything other than oil. Remember these stamps need to be treated like money.
- **Debit/Credit Card** - Most distributors will accept credit or debit cards. There may be an additional cost of between 1.5 to 2.5% for using a credit card. Check with your distributor before ordering.
- **Online** - Many distributors now have an online service where you can order and pay online using a debit or credit card.

## 4. Deliveries

The quality and delivery of home heating oil in Northern Ireland must meet strict legal requirements, which are enforced by Trading Standards Service.

- Both the quality of the oil distributors sell and the measuring equipment used must conform to strict standards.
- Before a distributor can make any deliveries, metering equipment must have a National Measurement Office (NMO) certificate stamped and sealed by Trading Standards Service.
- Additionally, a stamped ticket is produced on completion of each delivery made via a meter. For distributors using electronic meters, a ticket will also show the time of delivery. These records can be inspected by Trading Standards Service.

If you have a complaint about the quality and measures of oil, contact Consumerline on 0300 123 6262 (See Section 9: Useful Contacts).

### Useful tips about oil deliveries

- Regularly check how much oil you have left to avoid suddenly running out, especially in cold weather.
- Ensure there is access to your tank by keeping it clear of obstructions and secure any pets.
- After the delivery, check that the contents gauge registers the new quantity of oil.
- Check for any fresh oil spills or leaks and report a suspected delivery spillage to the fuel distributor as soon as possible.

**Top  
Tip!**



**Running out of oil can cause an airlock that may be expensive to fix.**

# 5. Boiler Servicing

## What you need to know about servicing your boiler

Get your boiler serviced regularly by a qualified, OFTEC (Oil Firing Technical Association) registered technician - this can help:

- Prevent carbon monoxide poisoning;
- Save you money in the long run as it will help to ensure it runs more efficiently;
- Ensure that you can claim on your boiler warranty;
- Prevent boiler breakdown; and
- Ensure that it's running safely.

Always use an OFTEC registered technician. Contact OFTEC on 01473 626 298 or visit [www.oftec.org.uk](http://www.oftec.org.uk) for an up to date list.

As part of a full service, a technician should perform a number of checks and not just clean the flue. Make sure your service includes a tank check. Plastic tanks are tough and durable, yet their pipework and fittings should be checked for signs of damage or leaks. Contact OFTEC to find out more (See Section 9: Useful Contacts).



## Carbon Monoxide

Carbon monoxide is a highly toxic poisonous gas, which can kill quickly and with no warning. You can't see it, taste it or smell it and therefore it is difficult to detect. As a safeguard, buy a carbon monoxide detector. These are usually inexpensive and easy to install.

Poor or inadequate servicing and installation can cause the generation of carbon monoxide. Therefore it is vital to ensure that your oil boiler is checked and serviced at least once a year.

Some symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning are as follows:

- Headaches;
- Dizziness;
- Nausea; and
- Breathlessness.



*Top  
Tip!*



**As a safeguard, buy a carbon monoxide detector. These are usually inexpensive and easy to install.**



# 6. Your Oil Tank

## What you need to know about your oil tank`

Unfortunately, leaks of heating oil from domestic tanks do happen and can cause pollution. Oil leaks and the clean-up operation can be expensive and your insurance may not cover the costs.

- One of the best ways to protect your tank is with a secondary container, around your tank, which is known as a 'bund'. This will prevent pollution and save you from the disruption of a clean-up after a leak. Contact OFTEC or visit their website for more information.
- If you are getting a new tank with a storage capacity of 3,500 litres or less, you must site your tank at least 10 metres from a river, stream, ditch or lake and at least 50 metres from a borehole or spring, unless it is provided with a bund. OFTEC can advise you of the best place to site or re-site your tank to minimise your pollution risk.
- Regularly check your tank for signs of leakage or damage and know where the shut off valves are located.
- Running out of oil can also cause an airlock that will affect your heating system and may be costly to fix.
- If you need to change your current tank, it is important that you get one that is manufactured to OFTEC standards (OFS T100 for plastic tanks or OFS T200 for steel tanks).

**Top  
Tip!**



**If you notice a sudden increase in the amount of oil you are using, check for leaks.**

- If you have an oil leak you may need to employ a specialist company to clean up the oil. You can also contact your local environmental health office for advice. Pollution incidents should be reported via the Water Pollution Hotline (tel: 0800 80 70 60).
- Review your homeowners' insurance policy, or contact your insurance company, to make sure your policy covers domestic fuel spills.
- If you have a sight gauge, make sure it hasn't been dislodged and its valve is in the closed position.
- Check for any changes in appearance of the tank and its supporting structure.

*Top  
Tip!*



Screening should be kept at least 600mm from the sides of an oil storage tank to allow access for inspection and maintenance.

## Heating oil theft and looking after your tank

By taking a few simple precautions, you can help protect your oil and boiler from thieves:

- Lock your tank and boiler housing. If possible fit hardened flexible casings to any vulnerable fuel hoses so that they are harder to cut;
- Keep your garden or drive gates closed and securely locked;
- If your tank is visible from outside your property, consider disguising it by using fencing, trellis or plants;
- Consider installing security lighting which can warn you and alert neighbours of an intruder; and
- If you have to re-site your tank or are installing a fuel tank for the first time, ensure that it is placed in a secure location - visible from your home and surrounding properties but not from the road.



## 7. Making a Complaint

For complaints relating to customer service follow the steps below:

- **Step 1**  
Contact your oil distributor and give them an opportunity to resolve the problem. If they cannot sort out the problem to your complete satisfaction, you can ask to talk to a supervisor or manager.
- **Step 2**  
If you remain dissatisfied with the response from your supplier you can contact the NIOF to see if they are a member. If so they will review your complaint.
- **Step 3**  
If you are unable to resolve your complaint, or if at any time you are unhappy with the response, you can contact the Consumer Council.

If you have a complaint about the quality and measures of oil, contact Consumerline (See: Section 9: Useful Contacts).



# 8. Energy Efficiency

## What you need to know about energy efficiency

- **Replace your boiler** - Replacing a boiler which is six or more years old with a modern condensing model can save potentially up to £200 a year.
- **Energy ratings** - All boilers in the UK are required to have an energy efficiency score. It takes into account variables such as climate, energy efficiency of properties, occupancy, and boiler or heating controls. The score is given as both a percentage and an 'A to D' rating.
- **Building regulations** - All newly installed boilers are required to be at least 88% efficient. For example if you spend £100 on oil then £88 will go directly on heating your home. Boilers scoring below 88% are still being sold but these will eventually disappear as new models come onto the market.
- **Upgrade your system controls** - Accurate temperature controls save money by reducing heat wastage. By reducing room temperature by 1°C, you could save up to 10% off your annual fuel bill. It also means that you can concentrate the heat in the rooms you use most and keep the others cooler.

*Top  
Tip!*



Becoming more energy efficient can save you money!

- **Energy Efficiency Tips** – The Energy Saving Trust advises that by being more energy efficient an average UK property could save £325 a year:
  - Consumers with a non-condensing boiler spend on average an estimated 18% more a year than those with the more efficient condensing system;
  - Insulating your hot water tank can save around £40 a year; and
  - Turning appliances off at the wall socket when not in use and avoiding standby saves around £35 a year.

For more information on energy efficiency or if you would like to find out about grants available in Northern Ireland visit the Consumer Council website [www.consumerCouncil.org.uk](http://www.consumerCouncil.org.uk) or contact Bryson Energy or the Energy Saving Trust. (See Section 9: Useful Contacts).

# 9. Useful Contacts



## The Consumer Council

Floor 3, Seatem House  
28 - 32 Alfred Street  
Belfast  
BT2 8EN

**Tel:** 0800 121 6022 or 028 9025 1600

**Email:** [complaints@consumercouncil.org.uk](mailto:complaints@consumercouncil.org.uk)

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

## Northern Ireland Oil Federation (NIOF)

**Tel:** 028 9186 2916

**Email:** [david@nioil.com](mailto:david@nioil.com)

**Web:** [www.nioil.com](http://www.nioil.com)

## Energy Efficiency Advice

### Bryson Energy Advice Line

**Tel:** 0800 1422 865

**Web:** [www.brysonenergy.org](http://www.brysonenergy.org)

**Email:** [advice@brysonenergy.org](mailto:advice@brysonenergy.org)

### Energy Saving Trust (EST)

**Tel:** 0300 123 1234

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

## Debt and Financial Advice

### StepChange

**Tel:** 0800 138 1111

**Web:** [www.stepchange.org](http://www.stepchange.org)

### Citizens Advice Debt Advice Line

**Tel:** 0800 028 1881

**Email:** [debt.advice@citizensadvice.co.uk](mailto:debt.advice@citizensadvice.co.uk)

**Web:** [www.citizensadvice.org.uk/nireland/debt-and-money](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/nireland/debt-and-money)

To contact your local Citizens Advice office visit  
[www.citizensadvice.co.uk](http://www.citizensadvice.co.uk)

## Home Heating Oil Advice

### OilSave

OilSave is a new service for oil heating customers, delivered in partnership by OFTEC and The Heating Oil Industry. (The organisations that support and uphold standards in the oil heating industry and provide help and information to consumer on getting the best from their oil service).

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



## Consumerline / Trading Standards

176 Newtownbreda Road  
Newtownbreda  
Belfast  
BT8 6QS

**Tel:** 0300 123 6262

**Web:** [www.nidirect.gov.uk/consumerline](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/consumerline)

## OFTEC

**Tel:** 01473 626 298

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

## Water Pollution Hotline

**Tel:** 0800 80 70 60

(To report a pollution incident that does not require immediate attention.)



# Notes

A series of horizontal dotted lines for writing notes.



Floor 3, Seatem House  
28 – 32 Alfred Street  
Belfast BT2 8EN

**Complaints line:** 0800 121 6022

**Tele/Textphone:** 028 9025 1600

**Fax:** 028 9025 1663

**Email:** [info@consumercouncil.org.uk](mailto:info@consumercouncil.org.uk)  
[complaints@consumercouncil.org.uk](mailto:complaints@consumercouncil.org.uk)

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

