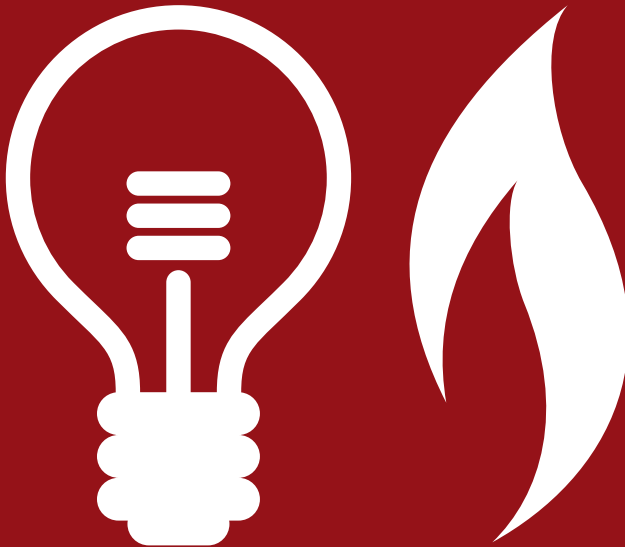


switch on

a guide for energy users



Electricity and Gas

Switch and Save: Electricity and Gas

Energy costs are one of the biggest household and business expenses. We have prepared this guide to help consumers get the best from their electricity or gas supply and save money.

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1.The Gas and Electricity Network

Electricity Network Operator

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

Electricity Suppliers

Domestic customers in Northern Ireland (NI) have the choice of six electricity suppliers to choose from – Power NI, SSE Airtricity, Budget Energy, Electric Ireland, Click Energy and Open Electric. Business customers have a choice of eight suppliers (See Section 13: Useful Contacts).

Natural Gas Network Operator

The natural gas network in NI is divided into two areas; the greater Belfast area, where the network is owned and managed by Phoenix Natural Gas; and the Ten Towns area, which includes Londonderry/Derry, Limavady, Ballymena, Ballymoney, Coleraine, Portstewart, Newry, Craigavon, Antrim, Banbridge and Armagh, which is owned and managed by firmus energy.

Gas Suppliers

Domestic customers in the Greater Belfast area can choose from two suppliers at present; firmus energy and SSE Airtricity. Business customers have a choice of four suppliers (See Section 13: Useful Contacts).

In the Ten Towns area, domestic customers and small businesses currently can only be supplied by firmus energy. If new suppliers enter the market then these customers will have a choice of supplier and will be able to switch.

2. Switching

Reasons to Switch

- **Cheaper electricity or natural gas;**
- **You may get a better service** - competition encourages suppliers to offer a better service or additional services, such as offers on energy saving products;
- **You can switch if you are a homeowner or private tenant,** as long as you pay the bill;
- When switching electricity or natural gas supplier there is **no change to your meter or the quality of the supply;**
- During switching there will be **no interruption to your supply of energy;**
- **Hassle free** - your new supplier takes care of any paperwork; and
- Unless you choose a fixed contract – **you can switch as many times and whenever you wish.**

**Top
Tip!**



You don't have to always switch supplier – even look at switching tariff from the same provider to save money!

How to switch:

1. It's simple! Contact the new supplier and they will start the switching process and deal with the paperwork. You have a ten working days 'cooling off period', in which you can cancel the switch if you change your mind. The switch must be completed within 15 working days after the end of the cooling off period, unless you have a longer notice period to give to your old supplier.
2. For electricity you will need your Meter Point Reference Number (MPRN), which can be found on your paper or online bill or your 19 digit code if you have a pre-payment meter. For natural gas use your SMP Reference Number, which can be found on your paper or online bill.
3. It will help if you can provide a current meter read but the new supplier will read the meter anyway.
4. There will be no interruption to your supply because you switch. Nor will there be any changes to your meter, your wiring, your pipework or connection. The new supplier may require a positive credit check and/or security deposit.
5. The new supplier will let you know when the switch has taken place.
6. Your old supplier will send you a closing bill.

What to look for before you switch:

Which supplier's tariff is the cheapest?

You can check the latest tariffs on the Consumer Council website www.consumercouncil.org.uk or call 0800 121 6022.

What are the terms of the tariff?

Some suppliers offer cheaper rates if you sign up to a minimum term contract, meaning you must stay with them for that length of time before switching again or pay a charge for cancelling the contract.

How will I receive my bills?

You can choose how you receive your bills, either via a paper bill or online bill.

Contracts:

- Your energy contract is a legally binding document.
- A contract can be agreed over the telephone, online or signed face to face with a sales adviser.
- Don't feel pressured to agree to or sign anything on your doorstep, even if the salesperson says it is not a contract or an agreement. Take your time and find out if it's right for you.

Your new supplier must provide you with written confirmation of your contract.

Your supplier must explain:

- Unit prices of gas and electricity;
- Terms and conditions of the tariff;
- Length of contract (if fixed term);
- Cancellation charges (sometimes called 'exit fees')– for example if you want to end your contract early;
- Discounts; and
- Security deposits if required.

Saving without switching supplier:

Change your payment and billing method:

Pre-payment and pay as you go (PAYG):

- Using a prepayment meter means you pay for your gas and electricity as you use it and won't receive a bill;
- Helps you budget and keep track of what you spend on energy;
- If credit runs out, there is a limited emergency credit before supply is disconnected; and
- Some suppliers offer cheaper tariffs for PAYG customers.

Paying by Direct debit (DD):

- This option can suit customers with a regular income, although you will need a bank/building society account; and
- All suppliers offer discounts for paying by DD.

Other Payment Methods:

- Electricity and natural gas suppliers offer a range of other payment methods. For example paying by cash, cheque or card at your local post office or by cash using PayPoint.
- If you don't have a bank account and would like information on setting up a bank account in order to pay by DD the Consumer Council has produced a factsheet 'Opening a Bank Account'. Contact the Consumer Council to get a copy (See Section 13: Useful Contacts)

Switch Tariff

- It's worthwhile checking with your current electricity supplier to see if you are on the most suitable tariff. Changing tariff may involve changing your billing or payment method.

Billing Method

There are usually different charges between receiving a paper bill and an online bill.

You're protected:

All electricity and gas suppliers must have a licence provided by the Utility Regulator and adhere to Codes of Practice and a Marketing Code of Conduct, which are enforced by the Utility Regulator (See Section 10: Codes of Practice)

**Top
Tip!**



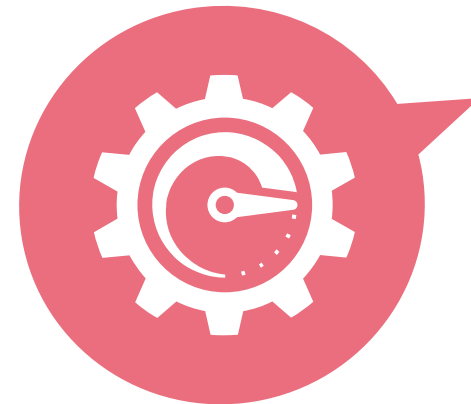
You have a ten working days 'cooling off period', in which you can cancel the switch if you change your mind.

3. Energy Efficiency

The Energy Saving Trust advises that by being more energy efficient an average UK property could make savings:

- Consumers with a non-condensing boiler spend on average an estimated 18 per cent more a year than those with the more efficient condensing system;
- Turning down your thermostat by 1°C can save around £90 a year;
- Insulating your hot water tank can save around 10 per cent a year; and
- Turning appliances off at the wall socket when not in use and avoiding standby saves around £30 a year.

For more information on energy efficiency measures and the grants available visit www.consumerCouncil.org.uk/energy/energy-efficiency-schemes/ or contact Bryson Energy or the Energy Saving Trust (See Section 13: Useful Contacts).



4. Energy Bills

Things to look out for on your energy bills:

Reference Numbers

Your Meter Point Reference Number (MPRN) for electricity and your SMP Reference Number for gas are the unique numbers for your property and should be printed on your recent bill. You will need these numbers if you wish to change supplier.

Standing Charges

Some electricity and natural gas tariffs have standing charges, a fixed charge which is applied regardless of how much energy you use, or a minimum consumption charge which is applied if your consumption is below a certain level. These costs are made up of the distributor's cost of transporting energy to your premises and the meter operator's cost of maintaining your meter.

Meter Readings

1. Make sure your bills are based on actual readings as this can help ensure they are accurate and can avoid unexpectedly high bills.
2. Your meter should be read on a regular basis but you can also submit a reading yourself by contacting your supplier.
3. If you're unsure about reading your meter, its location or have difficulty reading it, contact your supplier and they can arrange a reading at a suitable time.

**Top
Tip!**



Make sure your meter is read regularly. You can submit a reading yourself by contacting your supplier.

Receiving a higher bill than normal

Receiving a much higher energy bill than expected can be a shock. However, there may be a number of reasons why this might happen:

- **Estimated meter readings** - Your previous bill may have been based on an estimated reading. Once an actual meter reading is taken it may turn out that your consumption is higher than the estimated bill suggested.
- **Your tariff has expired** – If you are on a fixed term contract you may be switched back to a standard rate when your contract ends. When this happens your supplier must tell you what your new tariff is. Always check when your tariff ends and what your tariff will be once it does end.
- **Increased usage** – For example have you bought a new appliance recently eg dishwasher.
- **Mistakes on your bill** – Incorrect meter reading or being billed for the wrong meter or wrong address.
- **Faulty meter** - If you think there may be a fault, try switching off all of your appliances and checking if your meter is registering usage.



5. Power Cuts and Gas Safety

If you experience a power cut and you want more information, contact NIE Networks Customer Helpline on 03457 643 643 - have your house number and postcode ready or your MPRN.

Tips on power cuts:

- Know where your household fuses and trip switches are located.
- Keep a supply of batteries for torches, as well as candles in the house.
- Customers dependent on electrical equipment for healthcare should join NIE Networks Critical Care Register (See Section: 9 Customer and Critical Care Registers).
- Check on elderly or vulnerable neighbours or relatives.
- Never approach broken lines or damaged poles.

If you smell gas:

- Shut off the gas supply at the emergency control valve.
- Open all doors and windows to ventilate the room.
- Do not operate electrical equipment.
- Contact the Northern Ireland Gas Emergency Service immediately on 0800 002 001.
- Ensure your appliances are correctly installed and serviced annually by a Gas Safe Registered engineer.

Carbon Monoxide

Carbon monoxide is a highly toxic poisonous gas which can kill quickly and with no warning. It is odourless, colourless and tasteless and therefore difficult to detect.

Carbon monoxide is produced when gas appliances like boilers, ovens or cookers aren't fully burning their fuel. This usually happens if they have been incorrectly or badly fitted, not properly maintained, or if vents, chimneys or flues become blocked.

The Gas Safe Register has identified some tell tale carbon monoxide signs:

- Yellow or orange cooker flames - gas flames should be crisp and blue;
- Soot or yellow-brown staining around or on appliances;
- Inconsistent boiler pilot lights which frequently blow out; or
- More condensation inside windows than usual.

Symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning include:

- Headaches
- Dizziness
- Nausea
- Breathlessness
- Collapse
- Loss of consciousness



**Top
Tip!**

Buy a carbon monoxide detector. These are usually inexpensive and easy to install.

6. Moving House

If you are moving house you must let your supplier know as soon as possible as to when you have moved out of the property and provide a closing meter reading. This is also the case if you are a tenant or have a prepayment meter.

When you move to a new property it's important to contact the existing supplier, to let them know and provide them with a meter reading. If you don't you may end up paying the previous occupant's electricity or gas bills. If you wish to switch to a different supplier you should then contact your chosen supplier.



**Top
Tip!**



If you're moving house remember to provide a closing meter reading.

7. New Connections

Electricity

To get a new electricity connection you will need to contact NIE Networks and complete an application form. You can obtain this online or contact NIE Networks directly to request a form.

If it's a new connection at a property, NIE Networks will issue you with a quote for connection once they have received your details. If you are building a new property it is important that you plan the electricity connection as soon as possible as the process can take between nine months to a year to complete and there may be other considerations such as if the new connection requires access to someone else's land. You will also need to consider which supplier you will choose.

Natural Gas

If you want to install natural gas in your home or business you should contact the relevant gas distribution company to see if they operate in your area:

- For Greater Belfast and Larne - contact Phoenix Natural Gas.
- For Antrim, Armagh, Banbridge, Craigavon, Newry, Ballymena, Ballymoney, Coleraine, Portstewart, Limavady and Derry/Londonderry contact Firmus Energy.

**Top
Tip!**



When you're setting up a new connection, you will need to choose a supplier for your electricity/gas.

8. Renewable Energy

The main sources of renewable energy for the home are:

- Solar Panels;
- Air Source Heat Pumps;
- Biomass or Bio-Fuel Boilers; and
- Hydro and Wind Turbines.

There are a number of possible benefits to generating your own energy for heat or electricity, such as:

- Reducing your energy bills;
- Making money by selling energy you have generated; and
- Helping the environment.

Grants are available for some types of renewable energy. For more detailed information on generating your own energy contact the Energy Saving Trust or NI Direct (See Section 13: Useful Contacts).

You should check that installers are members of the appropriate Trade Associations and get at least three quotes. Care should also be taken with 'rent a roof' solar panel schemes. Contact the Energy Saving Trust for more information.

**Top
Tip!**



Grants may be available to help towards the cost of installing renewable forms of energy in your home.

9. Customer and Critical Care Registers

Customer Care Registers

If you have a disability, are a pensioner or are chronically sick, electricity and natural gas companies can provide additional assistance to customers who register their details with them. These services include bills in different formats such as large print or Braille and password schemes to help identify representatives from a service provider. A list of the services offered by the different companies is available on the Consumer Council website.

NIE Networks Critical Care Register

The NIE Networks Critical Care Register is for customers who rely on electricity for life saving equipment. This includes medical equipment such as oxygen concentrators, nebulisers, patient vital signs monitoring systems and home dialysis.

Customers on this register will receive up to date information should they contact NIE Networks during a power cut. NIE Networks will also contact customers on the register before any planned interruption.

10. Codes of Practice

Codes of Practice

Both suppliers and network operators like NIE Networks, Phoenix Natural Gas (PNG) and firmus energy must have Codes of Practice in place. These let customers know what levels of service they can expect and how to make a complaint. The codes will be available on the respective company's websites or you can request a copy directly from them.

Marketing Code of Practice

All electricity and gas suppliers must adhere to the Marketing Code of Practice. This protects gas and electricity customers, in particular vulnerable customers, from inappropriate marketing practices and guards against the mis-selling of products.

Guaranteed Standards of Service

Both gas and electricity suppliers and the companies who manage the network such as PNG, firmus energy and NIE Networks have guaranteed standards of service. These standards let customers know how companies should perform in the event of a complaint or network problems and include payments to customers should they fail to meet them. There are some exceptions to the guaranteed standards and the company may not have to make a compensation payment in all instances.

For a full list of the Guaranteed Standards of Service see the network distributor/supplier website or visit the Consumer Council's website.

11. Energy Advice for Businesses & Farms

In most cases electricity suppliers do not advertise a range of tariffs for businesses to choose from. Electricity suppliers will ask businesses to contact them to discuss and arrange a tariff that suits their business. While this has its advantages, it does mean a lot of responsibility is left to the customer to get the best deal.

Electricity Tariffs

Single Rate Tariff

With this you may pay a standing charge and then a fixed amount for each unit (kWh) of electricity used.

Twin rate and Weekend tariffs

These tariffs offer different rates day and night. The rate charged at night is cheaper than during the day, or in the evenings and weekends in the case of weekend tariffs. These tariffs can be useful for businesses that need to use energy in the evening or have equipment that needs to be left on or used at night. These tariffs will require a dual rate meter.

Seasonal Time of Day (STOD) tariffs

These tariffs charge different rates at different times of year with peak charges during the winter and different times of the day. These tariffs require a more sophisticated type of meter and can have up to eight different tariff bands.

If you're unsure what tariff is the best for your business you can ask suppliers to provide comparison forms in writing or via email, so you can compare these with your current or prospective tariffs.

Electricity Billing for Business

The format of the bill you receive will depend on your tariff. Energy bills can sometimes be confusing and it's worth remembering that the responsibility is on the supplier to make sure all the charges on your bill can be explained.

Some items you will find on your bill:

- Energy supplied – the actual kWh that you have used.
- Transmission and distribution (T&D) cost – this is applied per kWh supplied and is the cost levied by the distribution company that looks after the network.
- Supply capacity or availability – typically in kVA (at unity power factor $kVA = kW$). This charge relates to the infrastructure costs (the size of cable, etc.) for your site and is determined by the maximum connected load or an agreed supply capacity.
- Standing charges – fixed costs, either monthly or per day.
- Climate Change Levy. This will be reduced if you are part of a Climate Change Agreement or waived if your electricity comes from an approved renewable supply.

Natural Gas Tariffs

Some gas suppliers will offer published tariffs for small to medium business users but in general you will need to contact a supplier and discuss your needs to get the best tariff available.

- **IC1 Tariff** – this tariff is most suitable for small businesses.
- **IC2 Tariff** – this tariff is most suitable for medium businesses.

If your consumption is above these levels you may also be able to negotiate a tariff that's unique to your business needs. You will need to contact a supplier and decide on the most suitable tariff.

Contracts:

Quick tips on contracts:

- Consider what energy contract is suitable for your business, shop around and compare suppliers' offers;
- Read the full Terms and Conditions of your contract and the Statement of Renewal Terms when you receive them; and
- Keep a copy for future reference; and in case of any disputes with your supplier, keep copies of all correspondence.

Renewable Energy for Businesses

Using renewable energy sources or generating your own energy can offer a wide range of benefits to your business including:

- Lower energy bills;
- Energy price stability;
- Security of supply;
- 'Green' credentials which could be selling point for your products or services; and
- The possibility of selling electricity back to the grid.

For expert and tailored advice on the different technologies and grants available to businesses contact one of these organisations:

- The Carbon Trust
- Manufacturing NI (MNI)
- Action Renewables

12. Complaints for Businesses & Households

A step by step guide to complaining:



Step 1 - Complain to the energy company

Firstly complain to the energy company. Most companies will acknowledge and attempt to resolve your complaint within 10 working days and under the Codes of Practice guidelines all complaints made to your supplier should be resolved within three months.



Step 2 - Get in touch with the Consumer Council

If the complaint remains unresolved or you are not satisfied with the response from the energy company or they have failed to respond contact the Consumer Council and we can investigate your complaint on your behalf.



13. Useful Contacts

The Consumer Council

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

Tel: 0800 121 6022

Email: complaints@consumercouncil.org.uk

Web: www.consumercouncil.org.uk

Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation

Queens House
14 Queen Street
Belfast
BT1 6ED

Tel: 028 9031 1575

Email: info@uregni.gov.uk

Web: www.uregni.gov.uk

Northern Ireland Ombudsman

Freepost BEL 1478
Belfast
BT1 6BR

Tel: 0800 34 34 24 or 028 9023 3821

Email: ombudsman@ni-ombudsman.org.uk

Web: www.ni-ombudsman.org.uk

Electricity Suppliers:

Power NI - Domestic and Business

Greenwood House
64 Newforge Lane
Belfast
BT9 5NF

Tel: 03457 455 455

Email: home@powerni.co.uk

Web: www.powerni.co.uk

SSE Airtricity - Domestic and Business

2nd Floor
83-85 Great Victoria Street
Belfast
BT2 7AF

Sales: 0845 603 4444

Electricity customers: 0345 601 9093

Gas customers: 0345 900 5253

Web: www.airtricity.com

Budget Energy - Domestic and Business

Energy House
30-32 Ballinska Road
Springtown Industrial Estate
Derry
BT48 0LY

Tel: 0800 012 1177

Email: info@budgetenergy.co.uk

Web: www.budgetenergy.co.uk

Electric Ireland - Domestic and Business

Forsyth House
Cromac Square
Belfast
BT2 8LA

Tel: 0345 600 5335

Email: customerservice@electricireland.com

Web: www.electricireland.com

Energia - Business Only

P.O. Box 1275
Belfast BT9 5WH

General Enquiries: 03450 730 099 (09.00 – 17.00)

Email: customer.service@energia.ie

Web: www.energia.ie

Go Power - Business Only

1 Lissan Road
Cookstown
BT80 8EN

Tel: 028 8676 0600

Email: support@gopower.energy

Web: www.gopower.co.uk

Click Energy – Domestic & Business

1st Floor
Timberquay
100 -114 Strand Road
Derry/Londonderry BT48 7NR

Tel: 0800 107 0732

Email: chat@clickenergyni.com

Web: www.clickenergyni.com

Open Electric – Domestic Only

City East
68-72 Newtownards Road
Belfast BT4 1GW

Tel: 028 9507 2800

Email: info@openelectric.co.uk

Web: www.openelectric.co.uk

Vayu Limited – Business only

1 Whitehall Quay
Leeds
LS1 4HR

Tel: 00353 1884 9400

Email: info@vayuenergy.co.uk

Gas Suppliers:

SSE Airtricity - Belfast and Larne only

2nd Floor
83-85 Great Victoria Street
Belfast
BT2 7AF

Sales: 0845 603 4444

Electricity customers: 0345 601 9093

Gas customers: 0345 900 5253

Web: www.airtricity.com

Firmus Energy

Kilbegs Business Park
Antrim
BT41 4NN

Tel: 0800 032 4567

Email: furtherinfo@firmusenergy.co.uk

Web: www.firmusenergy.co.uk

Go Power - Business only

1 Lissan Road
Cookstown
BT80 8EN

Tel: 028 8676 0600

Email: support@gopower.energy

Web: www.gopower.co.uk

Flogas - Business only

40 - 48 Airport Road West
Belfast
BT3 9ED

Tel: 028 9073 0277

Email: natgas@flogasni.com

Gas Network Operators:

Phoenix Natural Gas

197 Airport Road West
Belfast, BT3 9ED

Tel: 03454 55 55 55

Web: www.phoenixnaturalgas.com

Firmus Energy

Kilbegs Business Park
Antrim
BT41 4NN

Tel: 0800 032 4567

Email: furtherinfo@firmusenergy.co.uk

Web: www.firmusenergy.co.uk

Electricity Network Operator:

NIE Networks

120 Malone Road
Belfast
BT9 5HT

Tel: 03457 643 643

Minicom: 03457 147 128 - Available 24 hours, seven days a week

**Energy suppliers listed are correct at time of print.
For the most up to date list of energy suppliers visit
the Consumer Council website www.consumerCouncil.org.uk/energy/electricity-gas-price-comparison**

General:

Gas Safe Register

PO Box 6804
Basingstoke
RG24 4NB

Emergency number: 0800 002 001

General Enquiries: 0800 408 5500

Text Phone: 0800 408 0606.

Email: enquiries@gassaferegister.co.uk

NI Direct

Web: www.nidirect.gov.uk

Energy Efficiency:

Bryson Energy Advice Line

Tel: 0800 1422 865

Web: www.brysonenergy.org.uk

Energy Saving Trust (EST)

Web: www.energysavingtrust.org.uk

Debt and Financial Advice:

Debt Action NI

Advice NI
1 Rushfield Avenue
Belfast
BT7 3FP

Tel: 0800 917 4607

Tel: 028 9064 5919

Web: www.debtaction-ni.net

Citizens Advice

46 Donegall Pass
Belfast
BT7 1BS

Tel: 028 9023 1120

Email: info@citizensadvice.co.uk

Web: www.citizensadvice.co.uk

Business Contacts:

nibusinessinfo.co.uk

Bedford Square
Bedford Street
Belfast
BT2 7ES

Tel: 0800 181 4422

Email: info@nibusinessinfo.co.uk

Web: www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk

Invest NI

Bedford Square
Bedford Street
Belfast
BT2 7ES

Tel: 0800 181 4422

Textphone: 028 9069 8585

Email: eo@investni.com

Web: www.investni.com

Manufacturing NI

C/o W.D. Irwin & Sons
5 Diviny Drive
Portadown
BT63 5WE

Email: info@manufacturingni.org

Web: www.manufacturingni.org

Northern Ireland Independent Retail Association (NIIRTA)

245 Upper Newtownards Road
Belfast
BT4 3JF

Tel: 028 9022 0004

Email: info@niirta.com

Web: www.niirta.com

The Carbon Trust

Unit 3, The Innovation Centre
Northern Ireland Science Park
Queen's Road
Belfast
BT3 9DT

Tel: 028 9073 4394

Web: www.carbontrust.com

Action Renewables

Block C
Unit 1
Boucher Business Studios
Glenmachan Place
Belfast
BT12 6QH

Tel: 028 9072 7760

Web: www.actionrenewables.co.uk



Seatem House
Floor 3
28 - 32 Seatem House
Belfast
BT2 8EN

Complaints line:

0800 121 6022

Tele/Textphone:

028 9025 1600

Fax:

028 9025 1663

Email:

info@consumercouncil.org.uk
complaints@consumercouncil.org.uk

Web:

www.consumercouncil.org.uk

