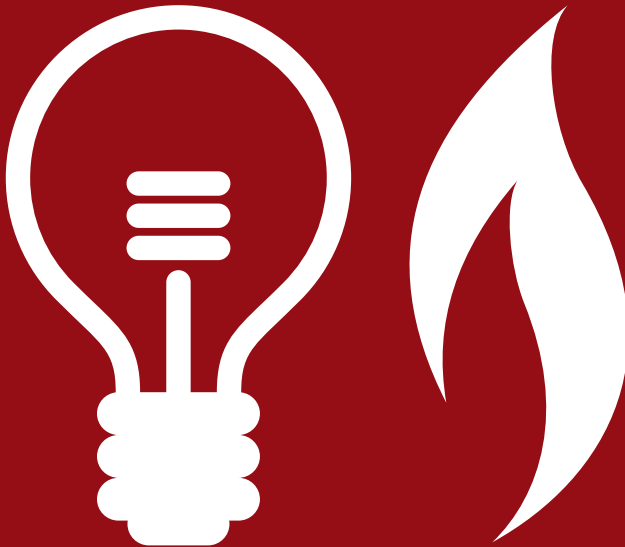


switch on

a guide for home energy users



Electricity and Gas

Switch and Save: Electricity and Gas

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

1. The Electricity and Natural Gas Networks	4
2. Switching	5
3. Energy Bills	10
4. Energy Efficiency	12
5. Power Cuts and Gas Safety	13
6. Moving House	15
7. New Connections	16
8. Customer and Critical Care Registers	17
9. Codes of Practice	18
10. Complaints	19
11. Natural Gas Network - breakdown of towns	20
12. Useful Contacts	21

A Switch On guide for small businesses is also available at www.consumerCouncil.org.uk or call us on 0800 121 6022.

1. The Electricity and Natural Gas Networks

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 fee to use their network 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 have five electricity suppliers to choose from – Budget Energy, Click Energy, Electric Ireland, Power NI and SSE Airtricity (See Section 12: Useful Contacts).

Natural Gas Network Operator

The natural gas network in Northern Ireland is divided into three areas ¹: the Greater Belfast area, where the network is operated by Phoenix Natural Gas; the Ten Towns area which is operated by Firmus Energy; and the west of Northern Ireland which is currently being developed by SGN Natural Gas.

Gas Suppliers

Domestic customers in the Greater Belfast area can choose from two suppliers at present: Firmus Energy and SSE Airtricity.

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

In the west of Northern Ireland domestic customers are supplied by SSE Airtricity.

¹ See breakdown of towns covered by each area on Page 20.

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 you rent your home, 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;
- You can switch as often as you wish but you may incur an early exit fee if you are on a fixed term contract; and
- You have a 10 working days 'cooling off period' in which you can cancel the switch if you change your mind.

**Top
Tip!**



You don't always have to switch supplier – even switching payment method from the same provider can save money!

How to switch:

1. Check the latest tariffs on The Consumer Council's online energy price comparison tool: www.consumerCouncil.org.uk or call 0800 121 6022;
2. Contact the new supplier and they will start the switching process and deal with the paperwork. You have a 10 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;
3. For electricity and gas you will need to provide your postal address. The new electricity supplier may ask for your Meter Point Reference Number (MPRN) and a new gas supplier may ask for your SMP Reference Number. Both of these can be found on your bills;
4. It will help if you can provide a current meter read;
5. 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;
6. The new supplier will let you know when the switch has taken place; and
7. Your old supplier will send you a closing bill if you have a credit meter.

What to look for before you switch:

What are the terms of the tariff?

Some suppliers offer cheaper rates if you sign up to a minimum term contract. This means you must stay with them for that length of time before switching again or you may have to 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; and
- Do not 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 is 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 pre-payment meter means you pay for your gas and electricity as you use it;
- 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:

- 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 Direct Debit.

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.

Switch Tariff

- It is 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 may be different tariffs if you choose to receive a paper bill or an online bill.

You are protected:

All electricity and natural gas suppliers have a licence from the Utility Regulator and must adhere to Codes of Practice and a Marketing Code of Conduct, (See Section 9: Codes of Practice).

Top
Tip!



You have a 10 working days 'cooling off period', in which you can cancel the switch if you change your mind.

3. 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 may be asked for these numbers if you wish to change supplier.

Meter Readings

1. Make sure your bills are based on actual readings as this helps ensure they are accurate and will help you 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 are 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 are various 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;
- **Increased usage** – For example you bought a new appliance recently such as a dishwasher;
- **Mistakes on your bill** – Incorrect meter reading or being billed for the wrong meter or wrong address; and
- **Faulty meter** - If you think there may be a fault, try switching off all of your appliances and checking if your meter continues to register usage.

Standing Charges

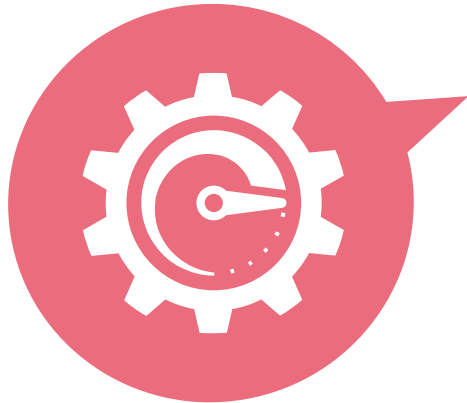
Some electricity and natural gas tariffs have standing charges. These are fixed charges which are applied regardless of how much energy you use, or can be a minimum consumption charge which is applied if your consumption is below a certain level. These costs are made up of the distributor's cost of transporting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

4. 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% 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% 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 12: Useful Contacts).



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 torch and a supply of batteries, as well as candles in the house;
- Customers dependent on electrical equipment for healthcare should join NIE Networks' Critical Care Register (See Section 8: Customer and Critical Care Registers);
- Check on elderly or vulnerable neighbours or relatives; and
- 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; and
- Ensure your appliances are correctly installed and serviced annually by a Gas Safe Registered engineer.

Carbon Monoxide

Carbon monoxide is a highly toxic 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 appliances like boilers, wood burning stoves, ovens or cookers are not fully burning their fuel. This usually happens if they have been incorrectly or badly fitted, not properly maintained, or if vents, chimneys or flues have 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; and
- 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 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 is important to contact the existing supplier, to let them know and provide them with a meter reading and your details. If you do not 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 are moving house remember to provide your supplier with a closing meter reading.

7. New Connections

Electricity

If you want to connect your home to the electricity network you need to contact NIE Networks. NIE Networks will explain the process and provide the application form that you will need to complete.

You can shop around for the best deal for some elements of the connection work. NIE Networks will give you a list of accredited electrical contractors so that you can obtain additional quotes. These are known as Independent Connection Providers.

The connection process can be quite lengthy in timescale as it requires significant planning and design and may require planning permission or approval from landowners. If you are planning to build a new property, you should contact NIE Networks as soon as possible.

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 ²:

- For Greater Belfast and Larne area contact Phoenix Natural Gas;
- For The Ten Towns area contact Firmus Energy; and
- For the west of Northern Ireland contact SGN Natural Gas.

² See breakdown of towns covered by each area on Page 20.

**Top
Tip!**



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

8. 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.

Contact NIE Networks' Customer Helpline on 03457 643 643.

Northern Ireland Water has a similar register for customers who rely on water for medical purposes. Call Northern Ireland Water on 03457 440 088 for more information.

**Top
Tip!**



Contact your electricity or gas supplier to enquire about the Customer Care Register.

9. Codes of Practice

Codes of Practice

All electricity and natural gas suppliers and network operators like Firmus Energy, NIE Networks, Phoenix Natural Gas and SGN Natural Gas 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 website 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 Firmus Energy, NIE Networks, Phoenix Natural Gas and SGN Natural Gas 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.

10. Complaints

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 will look to investigate your complaint on your behalf.

Tel: 0800 121 6022

Email: contact@consumercouncil.org.uk



11. Natural Gas Network

The greater Belfast area, which is operated by Phoenix Natural Gas, includes: Annahilt; Ballygowan; Ballynahinch; Bangor; Belfast; Carrickfergus; Carryduff; Castlewellan; Comber; Crossgar; Donaghadee; Downpatrick; Dromore; Drumaness; Dundonald; Hillsborough; Holywood; Larne; Lisburn; Newtownabbey; Newtownards; and The Spa.

The Ten Towns area which is operated by Firmus Energy includes: Antrim; Armagh; Ballymena; Ballymoney; Banbridge; Coleraine; Craigavon; Derry/Londonderry; Limavady; and Portstewart.

The west of Northern Ireland is currently being developed by SGN Natural Gas. It will cover: Coalisland; Cookstown; Derrylin; Dungannon; Enniskillen; Magherafelt; Omagh; and Strabane.

12. Useful Contacts

The Consumer Council

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

Tel: 0800 121 6022

Email: contact@consumercouncil.org.uk

Web: www.consumercouncil.org.uk

Utility Regulator

Queens House
14 Queen Street
Belfast
BT1 6ED

Tel: 028 9031 1575

Email: info@uregni.gov.uk

Web: www.uregni.gov.uk

Electricity Suppliers:

Budget Energy

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

Tel: 0800 012 1177

Email: info@budgetenergy.co.uk

Web: www.budgetenergy.co.uk

Click Energy

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

Tel: 0800 107 0732

Email: chat@clickenergyni.com

Web: www.clickenergyni.com

Electric Ireland

1st Floor
1 Cromac Quay
Gasworks
Belfast
BT7 2JD

Tel: 0345 600 5335

Email: customerservice@electricireland.com

Web: www.electricireland.com

Power NI

Greenwood House
64 Newforge Lane
Belfast
BT9 5NF

Tel: 03457 455 455

Email: home@powerni.co.uk

Web: www.powerni.co.uk

SSE Airtricity

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

Natural Gas Suppliers:

Firmus Energy

Kilbegs Business Park
Antrim
BT41 4NN

Tel: 0800 032 4567

Email: furtherinfo@firmusenergy.co.uk

Web: www.firmusenergy.co.uk

SSE Airtricity

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

Emergency number: 0800 002 001

Natural Gas Network Operators:

Firmus Energy

Kilbegs Business Park
Antrim
BT41 4NN

Tel: 0800 032 4567

Email: furtherinfo@firmusenergy.co.uk

Web: www.firmusenergy.co.uk

Phoenix Natural Gas

197 Airport Road West
Belfast,
BT3 9ED

Tel: 03454 55 55 55

Web: www.phoenixnaturalgas.com

SGN Natural Gas

3rd Floor
83-85 Great Victoria Street
Belfast
BT2 7AF

Tel: 0800 975 7774

Email: info@sgnnaturalgas.co.uk

Web: www.sgnnaturalgas.co.uk

Emergency number: 0800 002 001

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

General:

Gas Safe Register

PO Box 6804
Basingstoke
RG24 4NB

General Enquiries: 0800 408 5500

Text Phone: 0800 408 0606.

Email: enquiries@gassaferegister.co.uk

NI Direct

Web: www.nidirect.gov.uk

Northern Ireland Water

PO Box 1026
Belfast
BT1 9DJ

Tel: 03457 440088

Email: waterline@niwater.com

Web: www.niwater.com

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:

Christians Against Poverty

Jubilee Mill
North Street
Bradford
BD1 4EW

Tel: 01274 760720

Email: info@capuk.org

Web: www.capuk.org

Citizens Advice

Visit your local Citizens Advice office

Tel: 0800 028 1881

Email: debt.advice@citizensadvice.co.uk

Web: www.citizensadvice.org.uk/nireland/

Debt Action NI

Advice NI
1 Rushfield Avenue
Belfast
BT7 3FP

Tel: 0800 917 4607

Tel: 028 9064 5919

Web: www.debtaction-ni.net

StepChange Debt Charity

Wade House
Merrion Centre
Leeds
LS2 8NG

Tel: 0044 113 297 0126

Web: www.stepchange.org



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:

contact@consumercouncil.org.uk

Web:

www.consumercouncil.org.uk

