



The Consumer Council

**Responsibility for Fuel Poverty within
the NI Executive**

The Northern Ireland Act 1998 and the Departments (Northern Ireland) Order 1999, laid down the denomination and governance rules of the current Northern Ireland Government Departments. Fuel poverty was not identified at the time as the strategic responsibility of any of the new or renamed government departments.

The emergence of fuel poverty as a key strategic issue for the NI Executive began with the publication of the 2001 Housing Conditions Survey. The document highlighted that 203,000 NI households (33 per cent) were in fuel poverty. The Department for Social Development (DSD) was tasked in 2003 with developing and taking forward a Northern Ireland Fuel Poverty Strategy. The decision was based on the following;

- DSD's strategic responsibilities include housing, social security benefits, pensions and child support. These are linked directly to two of the causes of fuel poverty; low income and poor energy efficiency.
- During that period, amidst stable energy prices, it was believed that fuel poverty could be eradicated simply by improving the energy efficiency of the Northern Ireland housing stock. For example, the 2004 Interim House Condition Survey revealed that the number of NI households in fuel poverty had decreased to 153,500 (24 per cent) on the back of a 17.2 per cent improvement of the energy efficiency of NI housing between 1996-2004.

The NI Fuel Poverty Strategy 2004 established DSD as the lead department in the area of fuel poverty, which reflected the department's mission statement "together, tackling disadvantages, building communities."

Given DSD's lead in developing the NI Fuel Poverty Strategy 2004, the actions included in the document fell under the DSD's remit. These included setting up the Warm Homes Scheme and the NI Housing Executive's improvement, maintenance and Social Housing New Build programmes. However, the NI Fuel Poverty Strategy identified as well the other government departments responsible for developing and

implementing the Strategy in partnership with DSD. These were DHSSPS, DFP, DETI, DOE, DARD, OFM/ODFM and DEL¹.

Since the publication of the NI Fuel Poverty Strategy 2004 factors other than energy efficiency, namely rising energy prices and lower income levels, have caused a sharp rise in the level of fuel poverty in Northern Ireland².

The New Fuel Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland published by DSD in March 2011 reinforces the DSD's responsibility as the lead government department on this issue of fuel poverty. Under the New Fuel Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland, DSD is responsible for implementing the action plan included in the document. This includes actions outside DSD's statutory remit such as controlling energy prices and regulation of the oil industry.

However, DSD recognise within the New Fuel Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland that under the current NI Executive structure "no one government department or organisation can tackle fuel poverty singlehandedly"³. Therefore the New Fuel Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland states very clearly that DSD shall work to eradicate fuel poverty in partnership with the government departments involved in the Interdepartmental Group on Fuel Poverty. These are DHSSPS, DETI, DOE, DARD, DEL and OFMDFM.

The New Fuel Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland acknowledges calls for the creation of an inter-departmental group to coordinate the government's response to the problem. It also sets clear links between fuel poverty and other government strategies including DETI's Northern Ireland Strategic Energy Framework, the Green New Deal, the Sustainable Energy Initiative, and the OFMDFM's forthcoming new Child Poverty Strategy.

¹ Pages 5 and 6 of Ending Fuel Poverty: A Strategy for Northern Ireland.
http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/ending_fuel_poverty_-_a_strategy_for_ni.pdf

² 44% of NI households are in fuel poverty according to the 2009 Housing Conditions Survey.

³ Page 36, Warmer Healthier Homes: A New Fuel Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland;
<http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/warmer-healthier-homes.pdf>

The Northern Ireland Executive needs to tackle fuel poverty comprehensively in the short to medium term before energy simply becomes unaffordable to the vast majority of households in Northern Ireland. DSD needs to take the lead and coordinate the implementation of the actions included in the New Fuel Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland in partnership with the relevant government departments.

In the medium term DSD's authority needs to be strengthened and it needs to take responsibility to address the various factors that have contributed to the fuel poverty crisis within Northern Ireland. This could require a reassignment or transfer of government departments' functions and responsibilities, which is provisioned under article 8.1 of the Departments (Northern Ireland) Order 1999⁴, and would allow for the implementation of a cross cutting approach to tackling the various causes of fuel poverty.

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⁴ http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1999/283/pdfs/uksi_19990283_en.pdf