



National ENERGY Action Northern Ireland (NEA NI)

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Written submission to the Committee for the Economy on the Utility Regulator (Support for Decarbonisation Preparation) Bill

Summary

1. NEA NI supports the objectives of the Utility Regulator (Support for Decarbonisation Preparation) Bill and the proposed extension of the Utility Regulator's (UR's) powers so that it may provide support to the Department for the Economy (the Department) in developing policies and plans relating to the energy sector.
2. NEA NI believes the transition to net zero must be delivered through a Just Transition, that protects and empowers low-income and vulnerable households and contributes to reducing fuel poverty.
3. While NEA NI recognises the need for the UR to be adequately resourced, we would welcome further clarity on the potential costs associated with the Bill, and whether these costs will be recovered through licence fees and subsequently passed on to consumers.
4. NEA NI supports commencement of the Act on the day after Royal Assent and considers that there should be no unnecessary delay in progressing a Just Transition.

About NEA NI

5. [National Energy Action Northern Ireland](#) (NEA NI) is the fuel poverty charity working to ensure that everyone in NI can afford to live in a warm, healthy home.
6. NEA NI works together with frontline practitioners, companies, regulators and governments, to support vulnerable clients, raise awareness and achieve enduring change.
7. NEA NI chairs the Fuel Poverty Coalition NI and serves as the secretariat to the All-Party Group on Fuel Poverty. We advocate for policy and regulatory reforms to protect the most vulnerable, and we deliver accredited training to improve standards in energy advice.

the national energy action charity



Through the Belfast Warm and Well Project, we provide advice and practical support to local people struggling to keep their homes warm.

1. Clause 1 – Preparation for Decarbonisation of the Energy Sector: Role of the Utility Regulator

8. NEA NI supports the intention of Clause 1(1), which enables the UR to provide advice, information and assistance to the Department in relation to the development of proposals, policies, strategies and plans relating to the energy sector under the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022.
9. The UR has an important responsibility to promote the short- and long-term interests of consumers. NEA NI therefore considers it important that the UR is empowered to support the Department in preparing for and delivering decarbonisation of the energy sector.
10. NEA NI continues to engage constructively with the UR on consumer protection issues, including through participation in its Consumer Protection Advisory Group.
11. NEA NI supports the ambition to reduce carbon emissions and deliver NI's Energy Strategy, *The Path to Net Zero Energy*. However, it remains essential that decarbonisation policies are designed and implemented in a manner that keeps consumers at the centre and ensures that low-income and vulnerable households are protected and supported.
12. NEA NI is not in a position to assess whether Clause 1 alone provides the UR with sufficient powers and responsibilities to fully support decarbonisation of the energy sector. Additional legislative measures may be required in the future. However, NEA NI considers that the Bill addresses an identified gap in the UR's current powers and provides a proportionate response to addressing that gap.

Recommendation:

13. The Committee should support Clause 1, while ensuring that consumer protection, affordability and fuel poverty reduction remain central considerations as the UR undertakes its expanded role.

2. Costs Associated with Clause 1

14. NEA NI recognises that implementation of Clause 1 may give rise to additional resource requirements for the UR. However, we would welcome further clarity on how any additional costs associated with the Bill will be managed and the extent to which they may impact consumers.



15. The Department's consultation summary document notes that the UR may recover costs through licence fees, paid for by licence holders. We remain concerned that this could subsequently be passed on to consumers through higher energy bills.
16. This is particularly important given the continuing prevalence of fuel poverty in NI. [Polling](#) commissioned by NEA NI in 2025 found that 39% of households were living in fuel poverty. 1 in 5 households reported going without heating or electricity on at least one occasion in the previous 24 months, due to not being able to afford it.
17. While individual policy cost increases may appear modest, households already experiencing fuel poverty have limited capacity to absorb additional and cumulative rises in their essential energy costs.

Recommendation:

18. The Committee may wish to seek further detail from the Department and the UR on the anticipated costs arising from Clause 1, and assurances that any cost recovery arrangements will be designed in a way that minimises impacts on consumers, particularly low-income and vulnerable households.

3. Clause 2 – Commencement and Short Title

19. NEA NI supports Clause 2(1), which provides for the Act to come into operation on the day after Royal Assent. We see no reason for delay in enabling the UR to support the Department in developing proposals, policies, strategies and plans for the energy sector. Timely commencement is important to promote consumer interests and support delivery of a Just Transition.

Recommendation:

20. The Committee should support Clause 2(1) and the timely commencement of the Act following Royal Assent.