

# Warm Healthy Homes Strategy 2026 – 2036: A new fuel poverty strategy for Northern Ireland

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## Ministerial Foreword

My vision is for everyone in Northern Ireland to live in a warm, healthy home and the Warm Healthy Homes Strategy sets out a pathway to achieve this. This vision was widely endorsed by those who engaged throughout this process, and it sets an ambition that my Executive colleagues share. I am determined that we adopt a radical and ambitious new approach to addressing fuel poverty and increasing energy well-being.

Over the last few years my Department has worked hard to address some of the biggest problems affecting society in Northern Ireland. We have published an Executive Housing Supply Strategy that provides a long-term framework to deliver the right homes in the right locations to help meet current and foreseeable housing needs and demands and consulted on a draft Anti-Poverty Strategy.

To help make homes easier to heat during my mandate, I have invested £13.44m and improved 2,671 homes through the Affordable Warmth Scheme. From the start of the scheme (2013/14) to 30 June 2025, £126.23m has been spent, resulting in 30,872 homes across Northern Ireland seeing improvement. However, I want to be much more ambitious. The new Warm Healthy Homes Fund will therefore aim to deliver £150m of energy efficiency investment in its first five years. When this strategy is reviewed, we will assess the next phase of investment needed to address the scourge of inefficient, damp homes.

I also secured £17 million from the NI Executive to provide a one-off £100 fuel support payment to eligible pensioner households for winter 2024-25 after the removal of the Winter Fuel Payment and my Department worked at pace to successfully implement the Pension Age Fuel Support Payments for 250,000 pensioners. After significant engagement we also successfully achieved the reintroduction of Winter Fuel Payment for all pensioners from 2025-26 onwards.

I want this strategy to contribute to both lower bills and lower emissions and this is why it places a strong emphasis on raising housing standards and increasing investment in energy efficiency for low-income households. People understand the importance of living in warm, dry homes but many do not know where to go for trusted advice on reducing energy bills or why it is so important to improve energy efficiency and reduce our reliance on fossil fuels. Collaboration with community organisations, health professionals and advice services will ensure that energy wellbeing advice and information reaches those who need it most.

This 10-year strategy sets out many of the actions that will support those living in cold homes through long-term, sustainable solutions. These actions will only fully be addressed with cross-Executive commitment to do so, and this Strategy is recognition of that commitment.

I believe that we need to shed light on the experiences of those who cannot afford to heat their homes, and I therefore commit to enhanced fuel poverty reporting and monitoring to better understand fuel poverty and its impacts. I also believe it is

important that government is held to account for the delivery of the strategy and I therefore will be making an annual Ministerial statement on progress towards achieving its objectives, based on annual reports published by my Department.

While there has been considerable effort involved in developing this strategy, I understand that there is much now to be done to take it forward. I look forward to doing so in collaboration with my Executive colleagues and the many organisations who understand the needs of those living in cold, damp homes and are already supporting them to stay warm and healthy.

## Endorsements

**“The Consumer Council believes that this Strategy represents a real opportunity to deliver long-term, sustainable solutions to fuel poverty in Northern Ireland. We welcome its emphasis on understanding and meeting the needs of people who cannot afford to heat their homes as we know that too many people still struggle to pay their energy bills. We are committed to collaborating in the delivery of this strategy because we recognise that consumer protection and the alleviation of fuel poverty go hand in hand”.**

*Noyona Chundur, Chief Executive, Consumer Council NI*

**“Bryson Charitable Group has long understood the importance of tackling the root causes of fuel poverty and ensuring that people can access support in an energy emergency. We welcome the Strategy’s aim of targeting those most in need of assistance and therefore support the Warm, Healthy Homes Strategy and endorse its vision of a warm, healthy home for everyone”.**

*Nigel Brady, Director of Bryson Pathways*

**“Marie Curie welcomes the recognition of people with a terminal illness in the Warm Healthy Homes Strategy and the specific needs of this vulnerable group. Fuel poverty is a particularly devastating form of poverty at the end of life, given that the need for heating or medical devices can rise considerably after a terminal diagnosis, and at a time which is particularly devastating for both patients and their carers. Timely identification and support are critical for terminally ill people who need more immediate, direct support and recognition of this in the strategy is key”.**

*Christine Irvine, Senior Policy Manager, Marie Curie NI*

**“We are very pleased to see this Warm Healthy Homes Strategy published and welcome the considerable collaboration that has taken place in its development. For too long energy efficiency has been the ‘forgotten fuel’ for alleviating fuel poverty and we therefore support the Executive’s commitment to significantly increase investment in energy efficiency for low-income households. This will help lift more people out of fuel poverty for good”.**

*Pat Austin, Director, National Energy Action NI*

**“We believe this Fuel Poverty Strategy represents a significant opportunity for Northern Ireland to place consumers at the centre of our energy future and ensure that energy bills remain affordable for all. It sets out a framework for meeting our carbon reduction targets in a fair, inclusive, and sustainable way, while recognising the need for a coordinated, approach to tackling fuel poverty. The Utility Regulator is committed to working constructively with stakeholders to support consumers experiencing fuel poverty and to help deliver an energy transition that is affordable, fair, and inclusive consistent with our statutory duties.”**

*John French, Chief Executive, Utility Regulator*

## Executive summary

Our vision is a warm, healthy home for everyone. The following principles support our vision and will guide all the work we do. All proposals and actions must meet each guiding principle and contribute to our vision for the future:

<b>Long-term, sustainable solutions</b>	Focusing on long term solutions rather than short term fixes and aligning with the Just Transition principle to ensure that actions taken eliminate poverty, inequality and social deprivation.
<b>Needs-based</b>	Providing more flexible, holistic, and proportionate support that prioritises those most in need. Responding to the changing needs of those in or at risk of fuel poverty supported by better data.
<b>Collaborative</b>	Building partnerships, networks and collaboration across all sectors of society and within government to increase accountability and efficiency.
<b>Participative</b>	Enhancing the capacity and confidence of people and communities to seek long-term solutions to fuel poverty, recognising and removing barriers to meaningful citizen participation.

**Improving the energy efficiency of homes** is our first priority. The energy efficiency of Northern Ireland's housing stock is among the worst in Europe and to address this we need to raise housing standards and significantly increase investment in retrofitting homes to improve energy efficiency. Improving housing standards will help make homes easier to heat and set clear expectations from government across a range of housing tenures.

Our second theme focuses on **protecting consumers**, particularly those in or at risk of fuel poverty. This means improving our understanding of the impacts of changes on energy bills and making sure that when we fund energy efficiency and low-carbon heating measures, people can expect a common standard of installation and protection.

Our third key theme is to **build capacity through collaboration**, and particularly to build partnerships that can identify and provide advice and long-term sustainable support to those most in need. However, we also know that many people face stress just trying to pay for the essentials of life. We will work to improve access to the long-term, sustainable solutions that will help prevent or reduce future emergencies.

Reducing carbon emissions from our heating and improving the energy efficiency of homes will help create warmer, healthier houses, reduce air pollution and create new job opportunities. However, the transition will mean changes to people's homes, energy sources and behaviours. This Strategy therefore aligns with core carbon reduction pathways and will help reduce reliance on volatile imported fossil fuels. We believe that achieving our vision will **contribute to a Just Transition** by ensuring climate actions help eliminate poverty, inequality and social deprivation.

Central to addressing a problem is improving our understanding of it. We will therefore use more diverse and frequent data to design better policy in the future and ensure that interventions reach those who need help the most. Our **renewed focus on transparency** includes more regular, visible reporting and ensuring that the voices of those most affected by fuel poverty continue to inform the implementation of this strategy. This also takes into account improvements in data-sharing to help target support.

We have **collaborated closely** with other parts of government and ensured stakeholder engagement throughout the development of this strategy. We recognise the time, expertise and effort provided by colleagues across government and public bodies, as well as the voluntary and community sector. In particular, we appreciate input from our Reference Panel and the many people who have informed and influenced our understanding of fuel poverty and the solutions to it.

# Chapter 1 – Introduction

Protecting human health from the detrimental effects of living in cold and damp homes is the primary driver for tackling fuel poverty. Modelling from 2021 shows that 24% of people are living in fuel poverty<sup>1</sup>, and lower-income households spend proportionately more on their energy than higher-income households. Addressing fuel poverty in the right way can lead to improved housing conditions and, through better, warmer homes, improved health outcomes and lower energy bills and a reduction in carbon emissions.

There are many factors that contribute to making energy unaffordable. These include the energy efficiency of homes, the energy needs of the household, the cost of energy, household income and people's ability to access energy solutions that are right for them. In Northern Ireland we have much greater control over some of these factors than others, and this is reflected in this strategy with a focus on improving the energy efficiency of homes and building the partnerships that will enable those most in need to access support.

Our approach in developing this strategy has been to reflect and build on existing government priorities relating to fuel poverty while setting new bold ambitions informed by significant consultation. These include existing strategies such as the Energy Strategy,<sup>2</sup> Housing Supply Strategy,<sup>3</sup> Making Life Better: a Public Health Strategy for Northern Ireland.<sup>4</sup> The new UK Government Warm Homes Plan<sup>5</sup> aims to lift families out of fuel poverty and create warmer, healthier homes through energy efficiency improvements – a vision that reinforces the ambition of the Warm Healthy Homes Strategy. In particular we recognise that many called for wider poverty reduction measures to support the alleviation of fuel poverty and we continue to align with work on the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy.<sup>6</sup>

Our stakeholder engagement provided multiple perspectives and expertise from those who participated in the pre-consultation and consultation phase of this strategy. We have also listened to those people who experience times of stress when financial constraints prevent them from keeping their home warm and dry. Their voices have contributed to our understanding of the real meaning and impact of fuel poverty.

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<sup>1</sup>[BRE Group. Estimates of fuel poverty in Northern Ireland in 2020 and 2021](#)

<sup>2</sup>[Department for the Economy. Energy Strategy - Path to Net Zero Energy](#)

<sup>3</sup>[Department for Communities. Housing Supply Strategy 2024 - 2039](#)

<sup>4</sup>[Department of Health. Making Life Better - Strategic Framework for Public Health](#)

<sup>5</sup>[GOV.UK. Warm Homes Plan](#)

<sup>6</sup>[Department for Communities. Consultation on NI Executive Anti-Poverty Strategy](#)

## Structure and Outline

This strategy sets out a framework that will address fuel poverty and ensure *a warm, healthy home* for everyone in Northern Ireland. It begins by recognising that, while fuel poverty is fundamentally an issue concerning people's inability to heat their homes adequately, this masks some complexity and divergence in how it is measured and understood. The strategy proposes a new approach to measuring fuel poverty and improving our understanding of its impacts. It also reinforces the importance of visibility and accountability throughout strategy implementation by leaning on the experience of others, using better data, producing regular action plans and annual reporting on our progress.

Ultimately, our vision is a warm, healthy home for everyone. Three key themes set out our main areas of focus. These are:

- Make homes more energy efficient
- Protect consumers
- Build capacity through collaboration

These themes recognise that alleviating fuel poverty will require not only improving the efficiency of our homes but doing so through partnership and collaboration. They also acknowledge that while many of the changes needed to reduce fuel poverty and contribute to reducing carbon emissions will be positive, some will also be complex and care needs to be taken to ensure that low-income and vulnerable households are protected. Each theme has a related outcome which outlines the positive benefits that we want to see for people as we deliver this strategy.

The themes contain two strategic objectives each, making six in total. Each objective provides a clear statement of intent about what we will do to reduce fuel poverty. They reflect specific issues and areas of work which lie across government: housing standards, energy efficiency investment, partnership working, access to support in energy emergencies, and ensuring that both the cost of energy and the quality of works carried out in people's homes are carefully considered from the outset. The objectives are interlinked and will be most effective if delivered as a coherent whole.

Our six objectives will be delivered through 33 strategic actions. Throughout the strategy the actions are found under each relevant objective. They provide more specific areas of focus for government over the next decade and will therefore be found in action plans in the coming years. The full list is at **Appendix 1**. We recognise that over time, contexts and needs may change and we reiterate our focus on accountability by ensuring that there is continual stakeholder engagement and participation as we take forward these actions, and that our reporting reflects their progress. In addition, there are two strategic actions dedicated to delivering improved visibility of, and accountability for fuel poverty.

Four principles will guide all the work we do, from policy design to implementation and monitoring. These are important because they will help shape design and delivery: as actions are taken forward we will reflect and act on whether they represent long-term, sustainable solutions that prioritise those most in need. We will ensure that our actions are based on collaboration across society and government and ensure the participation of those we are seeking to support. These principles are set out below and underpin our vision, because it is not just what we will do that will lead to success, but how we do it.

***Long-term, sustainable solutions***

Focusing on long term solutions rather than short term fixes and aligning with the Just Transition principle to ensure that actions taken eliminate poverty, inequality and social deprivation.

***Needs-based***

Providing more flexible, holistic, and proportionate support that prioritises those most in need. Responding to the changing needs of those in, or at risk of fuel poverty, supported by better data.

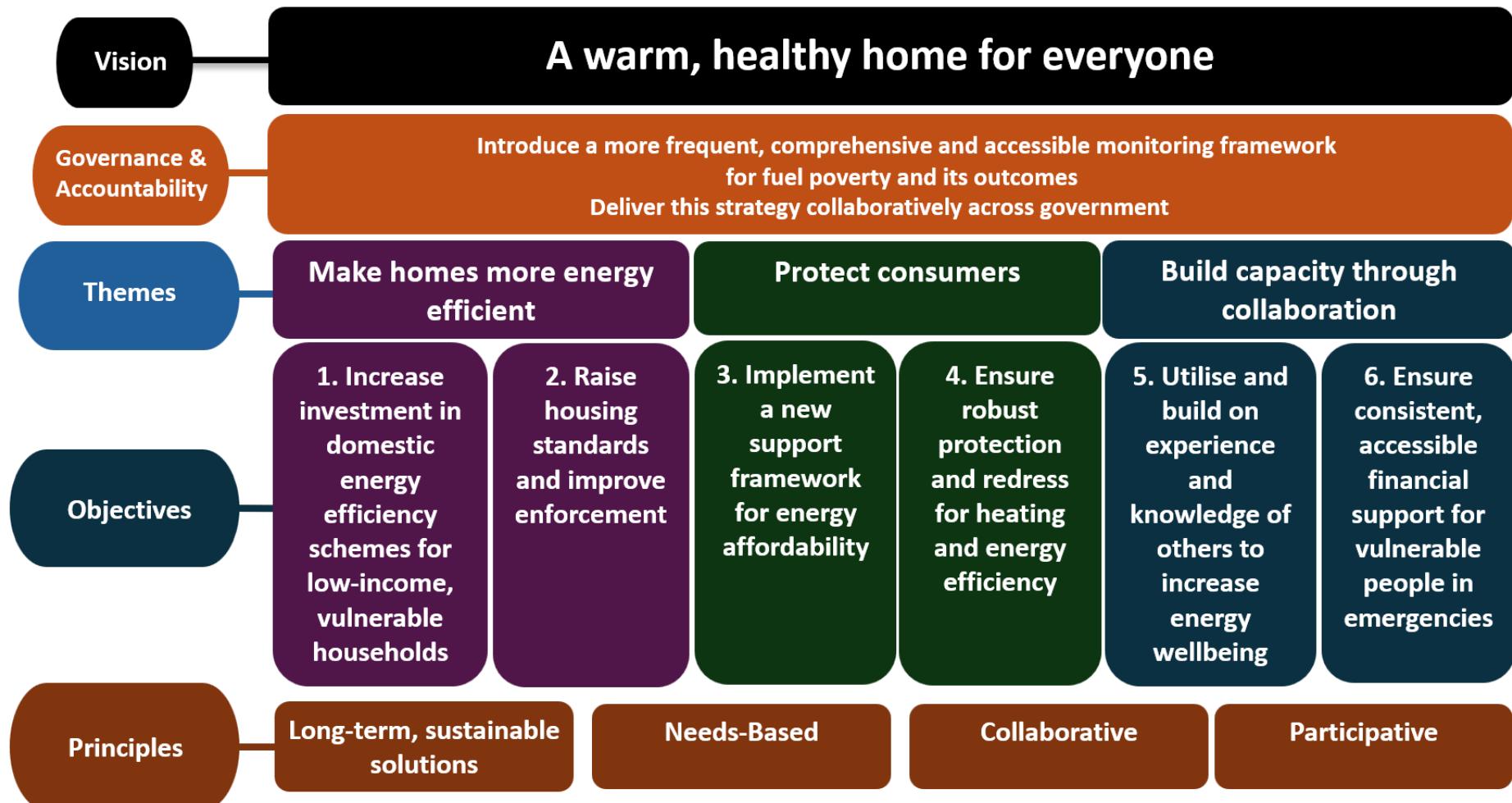
***Collaborative***

Building partnerships, networks and collaboration across all sectors of society and within government to increase accountability and efficiency.

***Participative***

Enhancing the capacity and confidence of people and communities to seek long-term solutions to fuel poverty, recognising and removing barriers to meaningful citizen participation.

## Strategy overview



## What is fuel poverty?

Simply put, fuel poverty is the inability to heat or power a household to an adequate degree at a reasonable cost. The three main factors that determine whether a household is fuel poor are household income, energy efficiency, and fuel prices. Draughty, inefficient homes require more energy to heat, and low-income households represent the highest percentage of those living in fuel poverty.

The methodology for measuring fuel poverty is different across the UK and in other parts of the world. Northern Ireland has used the same definition since 2001:

*A fuel poor household is one which needs to spend more than 10% of its income on all fuel use and to heat its home to an adequate standard of warmth. This is generally defined as 21°C in the living room and 18°C in the other occupied rooms – the temperatures recommended by the World Health Organisation<sup>7</sup>*

Using the same methodology over time provides consistency of measurement and allows us to understand certain trends in fuel poverty. However, there are limitations to the methodology, and we will improve our understanding of fuel poverty by using more frequent and varied data sources that reflect people's experiences of energy affordability.

Understanding fuel poverty also requires us to recognise its impacts: cold homes can cause and worsen physical and mental health conditions,<sup>8</sup> and people in fuel poverty may also be more susceptible to damp, mould and poor air quality. We also understand that people's individual circumstances can sometimes make it more difficult for them to address their needs or seek help, and income is not the sole determinant of this type of vulnerability. Our priority is to prioritise low-income households while also recognising that individual circumstances may require different levels of support.

## Fostering accountability and enhancing transparency on fuel poverty

We are committed to improving visibility and accountability on fuel poverty in Northern Ireland. Core to our approach is using more data more effectively and placing people's experience at the centre of this strategy. Our existing definition of fuel poverty will be retained but supplemented by a basket of indicators on health, energy costs, damp homes and energy confidence, with a greater emphasis on monitoring the underlying factors of fuel poverty.

These indicators, set out below, will form part of our significantly enhanced fuel poverty reporting and monitoring processes and will be used to measure and

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<sup>7</sup> [NIHE House Conditions Survey 2016](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Economic & Social Research Institute. Poor housing conditions harm family wellbeing.](#)

understand fuel poverty and its impacts. They will help us to identify groups not being supported by existing policies, enable us to be responsive to these needs and improve links between policies and fuel poverty outcomes. Details of these indicators are set out in the accompanying Definitions and Methodology Paper [[LINK TBC](#)].

**Table 1: Strategic indicators for fuel poverty and energy wellbeing**

<b><u>Fuel Poverty 10% indicator</u></b>	
Number and percentage of households that in order to maintain a satisfactory level of heating are required to spend >10% of household income on all fuel use. Modelling will consider what fuel poverty levels would have been had energy efficiency measures and income remained unchanged	
<b>Severe fuel poverty</b> - households required to spend 15-20% of income on all fuel use	<b>Extreme fuel poverty</b> - households required to spend >20% of income on all fuel use
<b><u>Fuel Poverty 10% indicator after housing costs</u></b>	<b><u>In cold weather home is adequately warm</u></b>
Number and percentage of households in Fuel Poverty after housing costs	Proportion of population able to keep home adequately warm in cold weather
<b><u>Damp-free homes</u></b>  Proportion of population able to keep home damp free	<b><u>Able to pay bills, including gas, electricity or oil, without cutting back on essentials</u></b>  <u>Proportion of population able to pay bills, including gas, electricity or oil, without cutting back on essentials</u>
<b><u>Low-income households in energy inefficient homes</u></b>  Low-income households living in energy inefficient homes	<b><u>Household expenditure on energy as a proportion of total expenditure</u></b>  Northern Ireland average weekly household energy expenditure as a proportion of all average weekly household expenditure, transfers and savings
<b><u>Energy confidence</u></b>  People know where to go for information and advice on how to make homes easier to heat	<b><u>Winter mortality</u></b>  Deaths in the winter months compared to the adjacent non-winter months

Annual progress reports will be published alongside an annual Ministerial Statement on fuel poverty. These will track strategic and progress level indicators, domestic energy schemes, actions for the year ahead and update on existing actions across government. A Fuel Poverty Advisory Panel will be established and act as a critical friend to government, offering constructive challenge and ensuring actions align with the strategy's principles and objectives. The Panel will operate independently to ensure it can function effectively. Its work will be guided by clear objectives and a framework for meaningful participation, ensuring that diverse voices are empowered to influence decisions.

Introducing a basket of indicators, annual progress reports and a Ministerial statement will be a meaningful and impactful way to measure progress and

outcomes. It will also provide greater transparency on where we are succeeding and where more needs to be done.

This is an Executive Strategy, with roles, responsibilities and interdependencies across government. Oversight, delivery and monitoring will therefore take place on a cross-departmental basis. The Department for Communities will provide the necessary leadership and co-ordination and ensure a joined-up response to the challenge of fuel poverty. Government is already collaborating on domestic energy and energy efficiency policy, residential decarbonisation and housing standards through oversight and co-ordination groups.

## **STRATEGIC ACTIONS**

We will:

- Introduce a more frequent, comprehensive and accessible monitoring framework for fuel poverty and its outcomes. This will include:
  - Action Plans
  - Annual reporting
  - An annual Ministerial Statement on fuel poverty
  - A review in 2031, with the option of earlier review if there are significant context changes
  - Embedded lived experience in reporting and policy development
  - Establishment of a Fuel Poverty Advisory Panel in 2026
- Deliver this strategy collaboratively across government

## Chapter 2 – Make homes more energy efficient

### OUTCOME: Improved energy efficiency for low-income, vulnerable households

Energy efficient homes are easier to heat and stay warm for longer. As good quality, warm, secure housing is vital to both physical and mental health, improving energy efficiency is therefore a priority to reduce fuel poverty. Vulnerable households at risk of fuel poverty and most likely to be negatively impacted by it can include those with low incomes, a long-term health condition or illness exacerbated by the cold, with the very young and very old particularly susceptible to the impacts of fuel poverty.

To make homes more energy efficient we need a balanced approach that includes investment in our housing stock and setting clear standards. While our aim is for all homes to be of good quality, we recognise that different tenures will require different approaches and timeframes to ensure that the changes are fair.

More energy efficient homes contribute to the Energy Strategy principle of “Do more with less” and the Housing Supply Strategy objective of reducing whole-life carbon emissions from new and existing homes.

To deliver on this outcome we will:

**Objective 1:** Increase investment in domestic energy efficiency schemes for low-income, vulnerable households

**Objective 2:** Raise housing standards and improve enforcement

### Objective 1: Increase investment in domestic energy efficiency schemes for low-income, vulnerable households

The Programme for Government commits to retrofitting homes to address fuel poverty, reduce emissions from the residential sector, and support green jobs for economic growth. This emphasis on retrofit aligns with our Energy Strategy, energy efficiency target and Housing Supply Strategy. Investment will deliver substantial savings for consumers<sup>9</sup> and generate savings for public health<sup>10</sup>. A very significant increase in funding for energy efficiency schemes is required, and while we project an initial £150m investment in the first five years of the Warm Healthy Homes Fund, we need to ensure continued uplifts in investment in the latter half of the strategy period. Government will collaborate to ensure that access to support is

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<sup>9</sup> [Climate Change Committee. Sixth Carbon Budget.](#)

<sup>10</sup> [International Energy Agency. Capturing the Multiple Benefits of Energy Efficiency.](#)

straightforward and home energy schemes complement and align with each other. This will be aided by improved data-sharing.

## Warm Healthy Homes Fund

Investment in energy efficiency is a priority for government because it plays a key role in improving public health, addressing fuel poverty and reducing carbon emissions. The Department for Communities will launch the new Warm Healthy Homes Fund before the end of this mandate, which will act as the Department's primary long-term sustainable solution to fuel poverty. This fund will aim to deliver £150m of investment over its first five years, and funding requirements for the second phase will be assessed to ensure that the fund continues to deliver our outcomes. The new fund will learn from the lessons and experience gained from the outgoing Affordable Warmth Scheme and similar schemes across the devolved nations. It will continue to take a whole house approach, delivering measures to improve the energy efficiency of households who are least able to pay for improvements themselves.

A public consultation seeking input on the draft proposals and supporting legislation will launch in early 2026.

## STRATEGIC ACTIONS

We will:

- Launch an ambitious, long-term Warm Healthy Homes Fund in 2027

### Case Study: Health Impacts of the Affordable Warmth Programme

Between 2014 and 2018 the Affordable Warmth Scheme delivered upgrades to over 16,000 properties, directly benefiting an estimated 41,796 people at a cost of £66m. The most significant health gains came from reduced exposure to cold, damp, and mould conditions strongly linked to respiratory illness, cardiovascular disease, and poor mental health. Improvements in heating and insulation helped reduce the frequency of asthma in children and eased respiratory issues in older adults.

The programme also had measurable effects on mental wellbeing. Warmer, drier homes reduced stress and anxiety, with evidence suggesting fewer cases of common mental disorders across more than 800 households. Better living conditions supported overall quality of life, especially for families with children and for older residents, who are most vulnerable to cold-related illness. These health improvements translated into £93 million in wellbeing gains, £4 million in NHS cost savings, and nearly £5 million in productivity benefits due to reduced illness.

## A cross-government approach

Government domestic energy schemes will be co-ordinated to ensure help is available to those who need it most. All government domestic energy schemes will apply the principles of this strategy; while not all schemes will focus on the fuel poor, this will ensure that the fuel poor are not left behind. The majority of government funding for domestic energy efficiency schemes should be allocated to those on low incomes and those households facing additional vulnerabilities. Government co-ordination is vital to support complementarity and a common approach to eligibility, ensuring that there are no gaps or cliff-edges in support for low and lower-income households. Full grants for energy efficiency improvements will be provided to those most in need through the Warm Healthy Homes Fund, targeting resources for maximum impact on fuel poverty.

Capital investment is required to achieve our energy efficiency ambitions and it is imperative that we substantially increase investment, while also focusing on cost-effectiveness. Core government financing will need to be supplemented by other funding, and we will explore and consider all possible revenue sources in order to help reach our ambitions. We have already commenced exploration of the potential for Housing Associations to access Financial Transactions Capital loan funding to support an approximate five-year pilot project for retrofitting properties to improve energy efficiency. A comprehensive review of financing that balances energy affordability, fuel poverty reduction, and climate goals is required.

Finance will also be available to private landlords to improve energy efficiency.

## STRATEGIC ACTIONS

We will:

- Co-ordinate design and deliver consistent, flexible, transparent domestic energy efficiency schemes across government to target those most in need
- Retain flexibility and assess potential to focus energy efficient heating schemes on low-income households where appropriate
- Explore potential funding for social housing retrofit e.g. NIHE stock investment and Housing Association access to Financial Transactions Capital loan funding to support a pilot project
- Assess and implement the fairest, most effective way to fund future investment in energy efficiency for low-income households

## Objective 2: Raise housing standards and improve enforcement

Inefficient housing stock contributes to fuel poverty, and housing standards in Northern Ireland are significantly lower than those in the rest of the UK. There are a range of housing standards for different tenures, many of which have criteria relating to energy efficiency, thermal comfort, heating, and damp and therefore impact fuel poverty. The Housing Supply Strategy aim is for all homes to be of good quality, meaning everyone can expect the same high standards no matter their tenure. Housing standards include a mix of statutory and administrative standards applying to different tenures and covering a range of safety, environmental and amenity aspects. While proposed uplifts of building regulations for new homes are under development, some of our housing standards have not been updated significantly for decades and improvement is now required. This will help make homes easier to heat, reduce damp and condensation through appropriate ventilation, make rental properties more attractive and increase the value of the house.

### Raising standards

Government will demonstrate leadership by improving homes in the **social housing sector**. NIHE has already been improving the energy efficiency of its housing stock and has made commitments to achieve further improvements by 2030, subject to a sustainable funding solution for stock investment. To improve thermal comfort and set clear guidelines we will put in place a revised and updated Decent Homes Standard by 2026; current proposals are that the social housing sector will be required to begin reporting their compliance with the new standard from 2030. The Standard will take into account improved thermal comfort and, if approved, will recommend a best-practice Minimum Energy Efficiency target for all social homes to achieve by 2030.

Compared to social housing, houses in the **Private Rented Sector** are more likely to be older and less energy efficient. In the absence of regulation, market forces are unlikely to drive improvements in energy efficiency in this sector. We will therefore introduce proportionate Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards (MEES) for this sector and shape its design through consultation with stakeholders. The availability of guidance and financial support to those landlords who need it will also be considered in the development of energy efficiency schemes.

Our current minimum **Fitness Standard** for housing is outdated and does not sufficiently address energy efficiency, inadequate heating or health risks such as dampness and mould. The standard's failure to require adequate thermal comfort has led to tenants relying on inefficient heating solutions, such as electric heaters.

Improved Fitness Standards will align with the design and implementation of other standards to ensure an appropriate framework for improving housing conditions.

## **STRATEGIC ACTIONS**

We will:

- Introduce a revised and updated Decent Homes Standards for social housing by 2026
- Introduce MEES legislation for the PRS by 2027 with an operational date to be confirmed following consultation
- Establish improved fitness standards for all tenures by 2030

## **Measuring and enforcing standards**

EPCs, which rate how energy efficient a building is, have long been used as a benchmark for energy efficiency in homes, yet their limitations are increasingly clear. A reformed EPC system could enable a more accountable, targeted, and effective Fuel Poverty Strategy and support related policy elsewhere.

Enforcement of standards is vital for compliance and to ensure that people are protected. Regulation of the Decent Homes Standard is undertaken through the Consumer Standards in the Regulatory Framework for Social Housing, with the associated enforcement powers. For the Private Rented Sector, where we heard most concerns and fears, we will ensure that landlords are aware of their obligations as new standards are introduced. A second phase of the transfer of the Landlord Registration Scheme to Councils will explore pathways for improving enforcement, including consideration of linking standards more explicitly to the registration process. We will improve monitoring and enforcement of PRS standards across all Council areas in discussion with Councils.

## **STRATEGIC ACTIONS**

We will:

- Consider future reformed metrics of EPCs to inform a more accurate, fair and future-proof model
- Work collaboratively to improve enforcement of housing standards across all Council areas

## Chapter 3 – Protect consumers

### OUTCOME: Informed, protected consumers have access to essential, sustainable and affordable energy

The cost of energy is a concern for many households. Investing in energy efficiency and generating and using more local renewable energy are crucial to reducing our reliance on expensive imported fossil fuels, as well as bringing improved health and well-being, greater economic opportunity and cleaner air. However, it is vital that changes do not bring unintended hardship to those in, or at risk of, fuel poverty. Therefore, we must specifically consider this issue and possible mitigations when assessing the impact of changes.

While those using regulated energy such as electricity and gas have a range of protections including standards of service and Codes of Practice, there may be issues affecting those using unregulated energy sources, such as oil, and we want to continue to understand these. We also need to consider protection when new insulation measures or low-carbon heating systems are installed. People should be able to easily access reliable, trusted advice, have confidence in the recommended measures and the quality and standard of work carried out, and have reassurance that, if things go wrong, they will be put right with help and support.

To deliver on this outcome, we will:

**Objective 3:** Implement a new support framework for energy affordability

**Objective 4:** Ensure robust protection and redress for heating and energy efficiency

### Objective 3: Implement a new support framework for energy affordability

Affordability is a key aspect of consumer protection and while carbon reduction investment brings long-term benefits there will be necessary short-term costs.<sup>11</sup> This strategy's priority is to help manage domestic energy costs through improved energy efficiency. However, a Just Transition will be supported if policies that will impact energy costs are developed and implemented in such a way that they alleviate fuel poverty as far as possible, particularly for those most impacted by it. Households should be able to access essential and affordable energy to enable a decent standard of living and health.

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<sup>11</sup> [Climate Change Committee, The Sixth Carbon Budget: The UK's Path to Net Zero.](#)

## Improved understanding of policy impacts on domestic energy costs

Energy affordability is a major concern for consumers, particularly those in or at risk of fuel poverty. Informed policymaking depends on good quality data, a broader understanding of energy costs and services for different consumer groups, and any potential new fuel poverty vulnerabilities that may arise in policy development.

The Just Transition principle aims to promote fairness during the transition from a high-emissions to low-emissions economy and to ensure support is provided to those who are likely to be adversely affected by it, particularly those who may be the least equipped to adapt to its effects. Ensuring that this transition is fair and just is key to making it work for all of society and will be supported by a better understanding of any potential new vulnerabilities that might arise. The Warm Healthy Homes Strategy provides evidence of the discharge of DfC's legal duties under the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022. Many of the Strategic Actions within the Strategy contribute to delivering on the requirements of the Act. The Just Transition Commission will provide independent advice, support and challenge to the NI Executive and departments.

The potential costs and benefits of energy policies and regulatory decisions on the energy costs of households in or at risk of fuel poverty are important considerations. Therefore, we need to improve our understanding of the needs of different types of consumers and the impacts of new policies and schemes so that, where there may be unintended impacts on fuel poverty, we can consider possible alternatives. This aligns with the Energy Strategy commitment to assess the impacts of upfront investment and long-term energy bills on identified consumer populations.

Our renewed emphasis on accountability, transparency and reporting will help us understand which groups are finding it hard to afford energy that meets their needs through the low-carbon transition.

### STRATEGIC ACTIONS

We will:

- Champion the needs of low-income energy consumers through engagement with the Just Transition Commission
- Improve quantitative and qualitative understanding of the impacts of new policies or regulatory decisions on energy costs for different domestic consumers, including households in or at risk of fuel poverty

## Managing energy bills

Relying on fossil fuels, such as oil and gas, means exposure to external shocks and volatile prices, but to some extent, energy bills can be made more affordable by understanding energy use and costs and changing behaviours. However, limited awareness of tools such as Consumer Council comparison tables, oil saving networks, the perceived complexity of energy tariffs and switching, and insufficient public awareness, all mean that many people are paying more than they need to for their energy. Surveys show that 48% of households say they have never switched electricity supplier.<sup>12</sup> Upfront costs of oil deliveries particularly affect lower income households: a third of households surveyed delayed ordering oil for more than a week because they couldn't afford a top-up. 42% of those surveyed were not aware of oil buying clubs, which can reduce costs.

As part of its Consumer Protection Programme 2024-2029 (CPP) NIAUR is committed to reviewing the existing minimum standard Codes of Practice (CoP) for gas and electricity suppliers and updating them accordingly. This will include review of Payment of Bills: protections for those struggling to pay for their gas and electricity or in debt. After the CPP mid-term review NIAUR will also scope and consider the potential for introducing new CoPs based on any new market issues or implications of moving to net zero and the Just Transition. The Framework also aims to deliver a new Customer Care Register structure that will help to ensure consistency of support and services available for vulnerable consumers.

### STRATEGIC ACTIONS

We will:

- Research barriers and opportunities for more affordable oil payment options, including oil-buying networks, to assess ways of improving these for vulnerable oil users
- Consider the potential for introducing new Codes of Practice based on any new market issues or implications of moving to net zero and Just Transition
- Promote awareness and understanding of electricity and gas tariff options and bills
- Work to ensure that all customers on the Medical Care Register are on the most beneficial tariff from their supplier

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<sup>12</sup> Utility Regulator. Domestic Consumer Insight Tracker Survey. [Microsoft Word - NIAUR Domestic Tracker draft report - final version](#)

### Case Study: EnergyCloud NI

Currently large amounts of renewable electricity are wasted because of the frequent need to curtail wind turbine production. EnergyCloud NI, a not-for-profit organisation, is making a real difference to lives by directing power - that would otherwise be lost - to homes in fuel poverty, for free.

In collaboration with the NIHE, EnergyCloud NI launched a pilot to help reduce electricity bills in April 2024 for tenants in Omagh. Their homes were fitted with a smart device and were equipped to receive power to heat their immersion tanks free of charge. Up to 20 families stood to benefit. Initial reaction to the scheme has been very positive. The EnergyCloud NI programme is not just well placed to assist those struggling to pay power bills, it also has the ability to help decarbonisation because the electricity it directs to homes at night will typically have a higher renewable content than that consumed during the day.

This initiative, which continues to expand as it attracts the attention of other social housing providers, has been made possible through the backing of electricity suppliers Budget Energy, Click Energy, Share Energy and SSE Airtricity as well as the support of the transmission system operator SONI and power grid owner NIE Networks.

## Objective 4: Ensure robust protection and redress for heating and energy efficiency

The Energy Strategy notes the need to review existing consumer protection frameworks. Such protections may mean different things depending on the service or product being offered. Certain protections are already in place for consumers in Northern Ireland, and there will be a significant programme of work in the coming years to ensure that users of regulated energy such as electricity and gas are appropriately protected. However, we are also aware that we may need to improve our understanding of energy sources where greater protection may be needed.

It is important to take a holistic view of protection when discussing energy and people's interactions with energy interventions in their homes. We therefore want to consider how to build trust in the installation of energy efficiency measures and low-carbon heating as we roll out new domestic energy schemes. When choosing or installing energy efficiency and renewable energy options, people need to have confidence in the quality and standards of work carried out and should be able to easily access advice. In addition, they need to trust that if things go wrong, they can be put right, with help and support.

### Energy supply and metering

During our consultation we did not receive evidence on significant protection issues for oil users over and above pricing concerns. This reflects Consumer Council NI research from 2022 which highlighted that the majority of complaints about oil

suppliers related to delivery delays and pricing. However, further research will help to understand current issues for oil users, if any, and whether oil suppliers are able to deliver better outcomes, particularly for rural, low-income or vulnerable consumers. The Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations (2008) exist to prevent businesses from treating consumers unfairly, and Trading Standards Service has the power to investigate complaints and implement enforcement.

Greater access to energy efficiency and heat pumps in rural areas will increase the number of households using better-protected, regulated electricity as a heating source. We do not propose to regulate home heating oil but we do need to ensure that customers using oil and other fossil fuels are not forgotten or left behind.

Regulation plays an important role in protecting electricity and gas consumers and positive changes are already underway to address some of the issues facing these energy users. For example, NIAUR's Best Practice Framework has developed and implemented a new mandatory CoP for Consumers in Vulnerable Circumstances. This introduced a new wider 'vulnerable' definition to be used by regulated energy companies to identify and support consumers in vulnerable circumstances across all operations where there are requirements regarding vulnerability. Implementation of this CoP will ensure that consumers in vulnerable circumstances are better identified, protected, and supported. Furthermore, gas network operators have commenced a project to replace prepayment meters with new meters that can facilitate online top-ups.

Plans to introduce smart electricity metering are also in progress. Smart meters provide significant benefits for consumers, giving consumers better information and more control. The roll-out will be sensitive to the needs of different groups of consumers, such as those with particular access needs or other vulnerabilities. Minimum standard CoP for gas and electricity suppliers relating to prepayment meter customers will also be reviewed, and if necessary updated.

## STRATEGIC ACTIONS

We will:

- Improve our understanding of any supply issues experienced by those reliant on oil and solid fuel and ensure these customers are not forgotten or left behind
- Work closely with partners as schemes launch to maximise take-up from rural areas where households are reliant on unregulated oil and solid fuels
- Review existing minimum standard Codes of Practice for gas and electricity suppliers and update accordingly, including Services for Prepayment Meter Customers, Marketing and Complaints Handling Procedure

- Ensure the smart electricity meter roll-out is carried out with consumers at its core

## Common quality standards

If insulation or low-carbon technologies are poorly installed or substandard, homes can potentially be left more difficult to heat or with damp issues. These would have knock-on impacts on fuel poverty, health and public trust and confidence.<sup>13</sup> A robust standard and quality assurance system for home energy schemes is therefore paramount to strengthen consumer trust and confidence. To improve consistency and quality and reduce the training and accreditation burden for industry those delivering and installing publicly funded projects will be required to adhere to minimum best practice standards that include:

- In-depth assessment of dwellings
- Risk assessment of all projects
- Provision of bespoke retrofit advice for the short and medium term
- Central co-ordination role for sequencing of works, appropriate commissioning and handover and compliance with the appropriate standards
- Rigorous testing, monitoring and evaluation
- key point of contact for the householder, trained to deal with vulnerable people
- Member of an appropriate accreditation body e.g. TrustMark

## STRATEGIC ACTION

We will:

- Require all those delivering and installing publicly funded residential retrofit projects to adhere to common minimum standards based on the principles set out above (Warm, Healthy Homes Fund at the outset and other schemes from 2030)

## Aftercare and redress

Providing clear, impartial information and advice on home energy measures and requiring installers and contractors to adhere to the same quality standards will provide a strong framework for consumer protection. Installing such energy efficiency measures and low carbon technologies should bring benefits for

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<sup>13</sup> [Citizens Advice. Home safe: giving consumers confidence to install low carbon technologies.](#)

households, but if things do go wrong there must be adequate protections in place. Under the Consumer Rights Act 2015 all products must be of satisfactory quality, fit for purpose and as described. Consumers have the legal right to a refund if they were unfairly pressured or misled into buying a product or a service they did not want or was not what they needed.

The powers which underpin enforcement and the thresholds to take action vary widely. If the complaints process fails to resolve a complaint, regulators may have powers to investigate and enforce. Enforcers include the Competition and Markets Authority and Trading Standards, but complaints may also be directed to the delivery body for a grant-funded scheme, organisations such as the Consumer Council NI, or standards bodies such as the Microgeneration Certification Scheme (MCS). Appropriate redress options require due consideration for Northern Ireland, particularly given the significant increase in such installations in the coming years.

## STRATEGIC ACTION

We will:

- Ensure appropriate aftercare and redress mechanisms for government energy schemes.

### Case study: NIHE Low Carbon Pilot Programme

In this Housing Executive-led pilot whole house retrofit, old doors and windows are replaced with more efficient ones, loft insulation increased, and cavity wall insulation replaced. These measures improve airtightness and reduce thermal heat loss. The heating system is replaced with an air source heat pump, and new, larger radiators.

Each property is fitted with a 4kW rooftop solar array and a 10kW battery pack to store electricity generated by the sun. These offset the running cost of the heat pump and can further benefit the household by supplementing electricity use. Tenants are supported by energy advisors who advise tenants how to get the best of the system and recommend changes to improve savings. Initial data indicates that tenants are saving an average of 32% on their previous energy bills, maintaining an average internal temperature of 21°C and achieving an 68% reduction in household carbon emissions. In post installation reviews some tenants highlight reduced damp and mould.

*"I could not be any happier, the system is brilliant and when the weather is really good, I spent £6 for the week. I had family staying with me and they couldn't believe how good the system was and how cheap it was to run."*

## Chapter 4 – Build capacity through collaboration

**OUTCOME:** Increased access to trusted energy and energy efficiency advice, measures and support for low-income, vulnerable households through partnership working

To alleviate fuel poverty, we want to ensure that people are accessing all the support to which they are entitled. This section focuses on collaborating and building partnerships to identify and provide advice and support to those most in need. A holistic approach, collaborating with partners and co-ordination of services will help to minimise duplication, maximise resources and improve outcomes for people.

We understand that some people experience difficult circumstances, with stress and anxiety even when trying to pay for the essentials in life. This experience means that they often rely on trusted partners, friends and family for help, support and advice. Building the capacity and confidence of people to seek long-term solutions is important but, in many cases, dealing with the immediate challenge of keeping their home warm is also needed.

To deliver on this outcome, we will:

**Objective 5:** Utilise and build on experience and knowledge of others to increase energy wellbeing

**Objective 6:** Ensure consistent, accessible financial support for vulnerable people in emergencies

### Objective 5: Utilise and build on experience and knowledge of others to increase energy wellbeing

To ensure people who need our help seek it, it is important that we raise awareness of the benefits of energy wellbeing, remove the stigma of seeking help and direct people to the appropriate support. People are more likely to seek support from those they trust. There is an important role for trusted partners in the health sector, the independent advice network and across the voluntary and community sector.

Building on existing partnerships and referral networks should improve outcomes for people in fuel poverty, as they will have access to more holistic support from the right people, delivering the right service at the right time.

To deliver better collaborative working at the place-based level we will utilise existing structures such as Community Planning Partnerships and others. We will also engage with the emerging Collaboration Test and Learn initiative which explores barriers to collaborative working and looks at practical ways to improve this. Its focus is on delivering more effective and efficient interventions to produce better outcomes for

communities. Using existing structures will avoid duplication of resource and strengthen partnership working to support our outcomes.

## Energy wellbeing information and advice

Building trust and confidence in energy, energy efficiency and the changes needed to decarbonise homes is vital. Consumer Council NI research<sup>14</sup> and our own consultation engagement<sup>15</sup> demonstrates that some people are uncertain, or wary of some energy advice and unsure where to access the right information. Households need clear, accessible, trusted information and advice on energy use in the home, as well as behaviours and sources of support to enable them to make decisions with confidence.

Collaboration across Government and our partners will be necessary to ensure those likely to experience fuel poverty are supported to access energy advice, information and grants. The NIHE delivers the NI Energy Advice Service through its role as Home Energy Conservation Authority. Funded by DfC, this is a free, impartial service providing energy advice and energy efficiency grant signposting for every household in Northern Ireland. The Consumer Council will lead a Consumer Engagement Working Group to inform and protect consumers, as outlined in the 2025 Energy Strategy Action Plan.<sup>16</sup>

It will be important to consider how to significantly improve how such advice reaches households living in or at risk of fuel poverty. Community organisations in particular support and advise households in vulnerable circumstances and we recognise the importance of these relationships. We believe that information and support can be improved through training and building capacity for trusted intermediaries who understand community needs. It will also require improving the consistency and relevance of information provided by government and maximising the opportunities to access this information. The Energy Strategy commitment on a One Stop Shop will also act as a focal point for all consumers through the energy transition.

## STRATEGIC ACTIONS

We will:

- Significantly increase the availability and accessibility of good energy information and advice for low-income, vulnerable households
- Introduce a One Stop Shop

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<sup>14</sup> [Consumer Council NI. Understanding Fuel Poverty levels and energy affordability in Northern Ireland](#)

<sup>15</sup> [Department for Communities. Fuel Poverty and the Just Transition](#)

<sup>16</sup> [Department for the Economy. Energy Strategy - The Path to Net Zero Energy - Action Plan 2025](#)

## Pathways to support

Not everyone who could benefit from energy efficiency grant schemes knows where to go, whether they are eligible or how to apply. For many households, the process can feel complex – this needs to get easier so that people connect quickly and directly to the best solution for them. By creating clear pathways for access to new energy efficiency schemes or other assistance, we can ensure that people access the right support, at the right time, in the right way. Such pathways should be built on:

- ✓ Early intervention – identifying need early, taking preventative action, and reducing future risk
- ✓ Integration – using trusted networks and community touchpoints, including health professionals and energy suppliers
- ✓ Accessibility – multiple entry points (phone, online, face-to-face) with simple, less onerous processes.
- ✓ Digital by design – a standardised, centralised and accessible portal, a referral system with secure data-sharing
- ✓ Feedback loops – regular monitoring to check effectiveness and adapt support

The existing NI Energy Advice Service works closely with scheme providers to ensure their advice on domestic energy schemes is accurate and up to date. A triage system ensures that households are guided towards schemes best suited to their circumstances. However, as we bring forward new schemes, we will assess the need for and, if necessary, introduce additional systems to improve referral pathways in partnership with those that work directly with vulnerable groups, including community organisations and healthcare providers.

We also need to utilise government resources more effectively to improve information and signposting capabilities for frontline staff who engage with low-income households and recognise the fuel poverty benefits of other services. For example, older users of Make the Call report improved well-being as a direct result of being able to turn the heating on or keep it on for longer.<sup>17</sup> Improving linkages and referrals across such government services will help ensure that people seeking one form of help can access a range of support to lift them out of fuel poverty. Leveraging existing structures and networks, such as Make the Call, Advice NI, and Jobs and Benefits Offices will help to avoid duplication and build on trusted systems.

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<sup>17</sup> [Ipsos MORI Northern Ireland. Independent Report on the Social Return on Investment of the Make the Call Wraparound Service](#)

## STRATEGIC ACTIONS

We will:

- Ensure that those in need of energy advice or support are identified and signposted to domestic energy schemes, with warm handovers for the most vulnerable.

### Case Study: Social supermarkets: wraparound support

Social Supermarkets are a model designed to alleviate food insecurity and tackle its root causes through comprehensive wraparound support. They provide a gateway to other services, such as advice on debt, benefits, budgeting, healthy eating, housing, physical and mental health referral, and education, training and volunteering opportunities.

In 2023/24, £2 million was allocated by DfC across all 11 councils, with each area tailoring its approach to local needs. More than 10,000 households received support, with over 6,000 directly benefiting. Bryson Energy provided energy advice and £200 vouchers to 166 households, helping families manage winter fuel costs.

One client, a single mother of three, received budgeting advice and help applying for Disability Living Allowance, which led to an award of Carer's Allowance and improved her mental health. As a result of this she was able to budget for an increase in future winter fuel bills.

*"This programme has taken a lot of stress off. I have been able to put extra onto my energy meter during the winter as have the voucher to spend on food and essentials."*

## Health risks and cold homes

The National Institute of Clinical Excellence Guidelines 'Excess winter deaths and illness and the health risks associated with cold homes' (NG6) were endorsed in Northern Ireland in 2015.<sup>18</sup> The guidelines contain 12 recommendations relating to fuel poverty issues such as training, referrals, housing standards and awareness-raising. Some recommendations are partially addressed by the objectives and actions contained within this strategy and some have already been taken forward in initiatives led by local charities or Councils. Gaps remain, however, and we need to build a more complete picture of where the guidelines have been taken into account, where responsibilities for the recommendations lie and which will be prioritised. One of these guidelines is to assess the most effective method for integrating health and social care professionals into the referral and support process, which will play an important role in pathways to support.

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<sup>18</sup> [National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. Excess winter deaths and illness and the health risks associated with cold homes.](#)

## STRATEGIC ACTION

We will:

- Carry out a baseline audit on NICE 6 Guidelines implementation and determine which recommendations should be highlighted for review or implemented, monitored and assured.

### Case study: Public Health Agency - Warmer Ways to Better Health (Northern area)

Following a Health and Wellbeing presentation on Energy Efficiency, a retired woman from an ethnic minority background mentioned that her home was very cold and difficult to heat. During a follow-up visit it was found that the oil boiler was over 30 years old and in very poor repair. Both she and her husband had multiple health issues including a history of cancer, asthma and heart conditions. Keep Warm Packs were issued and they were briefed on the Affordable Warmth Scheme. Their application was successful and window glazing was replaced, heating system improvements made, and a new boiler installed.

*“You are truly a blessing because since the new boiler and radiators are placed it seems my asthma attacks are almost on zero. I always have to order medication and inhalers every fortnight, and I am a regular patient at the asthma clinic and my lungs are weak... Do understand how thankful I am with your intervention making both our lives so much better”*

It was discovered that the couple carry out outreach in the area and this subsequently helped improve links with minority ethnic groups, facilitating the distribution of Keep Warm Packs and provision of energy efficiency advice and support to other people who were struggling.

## Communities and energy

One way to improve energy wellbeing is by working through and with communities, an approach already seen in local initiatives and well-established in other parts of the UK and Ireland. Grassroots opportunities for communities could include joining an oil-saving network, organising community advice pop-up sessions<sup>19</sup> or using local networks to support vulnerable households through referrals to energy efficiency grants and fuel vouchers.

Communities may also want to develop local energy-saving or energy-generation projects in their area, which will empower them to tailor benefits to their own needs such as contributing to the reduction of fuel poverty. Such projects can also help community organisations increase their financial sustainability if they are able to reduce their own energy bills. In addition, community benefit schemes from large-scale renewable generation are already well-established and such benefits are expected to continue to be delivered.

<sup>19</sup> [Centre for Sustainable Energy. How to run a community energy advice service.](#)

Facilitating active consumers and energy communities can help foster locally led engagement on energy and improve household energy wellbeing. We will build on current research, good practice elsewhere and local experience of community projects and initiatives. This co-ordinated effort will work to create a structure that empowers communities to take ownership of their energy needs to help tackle fuel poverty, enhance energy resilience and support climate goals.

### **STRATEGIC ACTIONS**

We will:

- Collaborate on the development of a community energy policy that is inclusive of fuel poverty initiatives
- Explore how to support community energy projects that have the potential to impact fuel poverty through guidance and funding

#### **Case Study: Sustainable Energy Communities NI**

This project, funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, empowers communities to tackle fuel poverty and rising energy costs through sustainable energy solutions. Working with four community organisations: Ballymacash Sports Academy, Inner North Belfast Neighbourhood Renewal, The Dolmens Climate Action Network, and The Oak Healthy Living Centre, it supports the development of tailored Energy Master Plans to guide local energy strategies.

A key focus is addressing fuel poverty through direct community engagement. The project has hosted 18 advice clinics, assisted 64 individuals, and conducted 20 events to share information on energy saving, retrofit options, renewable energy, and available grants. To date, 10 energy assessments for community buildings have been completed, with 21 planned. Additionally, 150 Home Energy Assessments are underway to identify household-level improvements.

SEC NI has allocated £50,000 to fuel poverty support programmes and £15,000 for energy-saving items such as LED bulbs and radiator reflectors. These are complemented by questionnaires and surveys to better understand local needs. Ballymacash Sports Academy is installing solar PV, battery storage, and EV charging infrastructure, with projected savings of over 25,000 kWh. This multi-pronged approach demonstrates how community-led energy planning can effectively combat fuel poverty while promoting sustainability.

### **Objective 6: Ensure consistent, accessible financial support for low-income, vulnerable households in emergencies**

Households struggling with fuel poverty can sometimes find it difficult to look to the future and seek long-term help. Certain groups, such as elderly people or those with health conditions, can also face additional challenges in accessing help and support.

We recognise that improving appropriate data sharing may help to identify and provide support to those who are finding it difficult to afford to heat their homes. While we are committed to collaboration and building partnerships to ensure long term help, we recognise that people will still experience crises when access to emergency financial support is required. However, in line with the overarching principles of this strategy, the provision of emergency support should be accompanied by energy advice, a referral to a long-term sustainable solution to support energy wellbeing, or both.

## Consistent emergency support and referrals

While our focus is to improve collaboration and partnership so that more people access long-term support, we recognise that people can still experience crises or unforeseen events and seek emergency financial help. Access to emergency support should not be conditional on engaging with long-term solutions. However, referrals to both energy efficiency support and benefit maximisation should still be provided where appropriate.

Emergency support for low-income households is available through Discretionary Support (DS), a scheme unique to Northern Ireland which provides fast and responsive means of providing short-term financial support in emergencies. As this is the only Northern Ireland-wide support available we will seek to make legislative changes to make it more flexible by allowing grants as well as loans for fuel. We will also explore enabling support for boiler repair.

As set out in the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation's (NIAUR) Domestic Consumer Energy Charter, electricity and gas suppliers commit during winter to providing extra support for domestic consumers, including a financial contribution to a third-party hardship fund which can provide support to those struggling to pay bills.<sup>20</sup>

The voluntary and community sector responds to the local needs of the communities where they operate, and we recognise that requiring such organisations to provide consistent support across Northern Ireland would not necessarily be appropriate. However, co-ordination is important, and we will engage with existing initiatives to ensure better collaborative working at the place-based level when designing and delivering initiatives to address fuel poverty.

Different support may be appropriate for those who are nearing end-of-life, as retrofit timeframes may be too long to help them live comfortably and without fear of high energy bills. An evidence base will help us to assess the needs of this population, what potential support should be targeted at those with a terminal illness, and the most effective channels for such support. We are also aware that

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<sup>20</sup> [NIAUR. Winter 2024/25 Domestic Consumer Energy Charter - Winter 2024.](#)

energy needs for medical or life-saving reasons can increase bills and cause stress, and we want to explore ways to address this.

## **STRATEGIC ACTION**

We will:

- Introduce additional measures in Discretionary Support to provide support for boiler repairs, and grants as well as loans for fuel
- Explore end-of-life energy needs and challenges and provide appropriate support

## **Targeting support in a future energy crisis**

Different support approaches may be applied in a wider cost-of living crisis when mass payments are proposed. For example, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine government had to step in with universal energy bill support, which in NI was delivered via energy suppliers and supported by NIAUR. During the post-COVID cost of living crisis, the Department for Work and Pensions made large-scale payments on behalf of DfC using the benefits system.

A barrier to improving our ability to target support to those most in need is the absence of appropriate data-sharing. There is ongoing work to ensure the outstanding parts of the Digital Economy Act 2017 can be enacted in Northern Ireland as soon as possible. This will help create a clear framework of rules on sharing personal data, while ensuring privacy, clarity and consistency. It could improve our ability to target public services or the provision of benefits, including in an energy emergency, to those most in need.

## **STRATEGIC ACTION**

We will:

- Identify and act on improvements to data-sharing that could help target assistance at those most in need, including in an energy price crisis

## Chapter 5 – Conclusion

This strategy provides a comprehensive framework for long-term change and the reduction of fuel poverty. It is not the end of the journey but the beginning of a decade of delivery, and work will immediately begin on preparing the first action plan. This will set out key supporting actions in the coming years.

While DfC will continue to provide leadership on fuel poverty, implementing this strategy will require even greater coordination across government and with our stakeholders. To ensure continuity between strategy development and implementation, the existing Programme Board will remain in place for an initial period while we review governance needs and determine the appropriate structure for oversight and delivery going forward.

Our focus on fostering accountability and enhancing transparency will be delivered by annual reporting, the establishment of a Fuel Poverty Advisory Panel, and a renewed focus on lived experience. From the outset we have focused on good data and recognise that strategic indicators will need to be supplemented by progress-level indicators that help us to monitor delivery in a timely manner. This will ensure that progress is transparent and that those most affected by fuel poverty remain at the heart of decision making.

## Appendix 1: Strategic Actions

<b>Governance and Accountability</b>	
<b>1</b>	Introduce a more frequent, comprehensive and accessible monitoring framework for fuel poverty and its outcomes.
<b>2</b>	Deliver this strategy collaboratively across government
<b>Make homes more energy efficient</b>	
<b>3</b>	Launch an ambitious, long-term Warm Healthy Homes Fund in 2027
<b>4</b>	Co-ordinate design and deliver consistent, flexible, transparent domestic energy efficiency schemes across government to target those most in need
<b>5</b>	Retain flexibility and assess potential to focus energy efficient heating schemes on low-income households where appropriate
<b>6</b>	Explore potential funding for social housing retrofit e.g. NIHE stock investment and Housing Association access to Financial Transactions Capital loan funding to support a pilot project
<b>7</b>	Assess and implement the fairest, most effective way to fund future investment in energy efficiency for low-income households
<b>8</b>	Introduce a revised and updated Decent Homes Standards for social housing by 2026
<b>9</b>	Introduce MEES legislation for the PRS by 2027 with an operational date to be confirmed following consultation
<b>10</b>	Establish improved fitness standards for all tenures by 2030
<b>11</b>	Align EPCs with future reformed metrics to inform a more accurate, fair and future-proof model
<b>12</b>	Work collaboratively to improve enforcement of housing standards across all Council areas
<b>Protect consumers</b>	
<b>13</b>	Champion the needs of low-income energy consumers through engagement with the Just Transition Commission
<b>14</b>	Improve quantitative and qualitative understanding of the impacts of new policies or regulatory decisions on energy costs for different domestic consumers, including households in or at risk of fuel poverty
<b>15</b>	Research barriers and opportunities for more affordable oil payment options, including oil-buying networks, to assess ways of improving these for vulnerable oil users
<b>16</b>	Consider the potential for introducing new Codes of Practice based on any new market issues or implications of moving to net zero and Just Transition
<b>17</b>	Promote awareness and understanding of electricity and gas tariff options and bills

18	Move towards ensuring that all customers on the Medical Care Register are on the most beneficial tariff from their supplier
19	Improve our understanding of any supply issues experienced by those reliant on oil and solid fuel and ensure these customers are not forgotten or left behind
20	Work closely with partners as schemes launch to maximise take-up from rural areas where households are reliant on unregulated oil and solid fuels
21	Review existing minimum standard Codes of Practice (CoPs) for gas and electricity suppliers and update accordingly, including Services for Prepayment Meter Customers, Marketing and Complaints Handling Procedure
22	Ensure the smart electricity meter roll-out is carried out with consumers at its core
23	Require all those delivering and installing publicly funded residential retrofit projects to adhere to common minimum standards based on the principles set out above (Warm, Healthy Homes Fund at the outset and other schemes from 2030)
24	Ensure appropriate aftercare and redress mechanisms for government energy schemes.

### Build Capacity through Collaboration

25	Significantly increase the availability and accessibility of good energy information and advice for low-income, vulnerable households
26	Introduce a One Stop Shop
27	Ensure that those in need of energy advice or support are identified and signposted to domestic energy schemes, with warm handovers for the most vulnerable.
28	Carry out baseline audit on NICE 6 Guidelines implementation and determine which recommendations should be highlighted for review or implemented, monitored and assured.
29	Collaborate on the development of a community energy policy that is inclusive of fuel poverty initiatives
30	Explore how to support community energy projects that have the potential to impact fuel poverty through guidance and funding
31	Introduce additional measures in Discretionary Support to provide support for boiler repairs, and grants as well as loans for fuel
32	Explore end-of-life energy needs and challenges and provide appropriate support
33	Identify and act on improvements to data-sharing that could help target assistance at those most in need, including in an energy price crisis