

Constituency Casework Guide

Domestic heating and energy efficiency

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The global energy crisis and a rise in the cost of living is impacting negatively on many consumers in Northern Ireland, particularly low-income and vulnerable households who may be struggling with household finances. Constituency offices may be experiencing an increase in constituents seeking information, advice and assistance with home heating affordability, domestic energy efficiency, debt and household finances.

The purpose of this Constituency Casework Guide is to signpost MLAs and their constituency staff to existing sources of helpful information. This guide is by no means intended to be definitive. Social media is an excellent source of up-to-date information on advice and guidance and links to key Facebook and Twitter feeds are included throughout the guide.

Should MLAs or their constituency staff have any suggestions for information they would like to see in the guide, or have links to useful information that they would like to share, please feel free to contact the Assembly Research and Information Service.

1 The new Energy Costs Support Schemes

There are two new [Energy Costs Support Schemes](#) for Northern Ireland i.e. the **Energy Payment Support Scheme** and the **Emergency Fuel Payment Scheme**.

Further information on both schemes is available from the NI Direct website [here](#) and a brief overview of the schemes is provided below along with useful hyperlinks.

The Energy Payment Support Scheme

The [Energy Payment Support Scheme](#) has been put in place to support those most affected by rising energy prices. It consists of a one-off payment of £200 that will be paid automatically to those who are eligible for the payment (there is **no application required for this payment**, it will be paid to individuals through existing benefit payment channels).

The NI Direct website states that the payment will be made “as soon as practically possible” and the Department for Communities has asked for patience as there are a large number of payments to be processed. An allocation of £55 million to the Department for Communities for the scheme was [announced](#) by the Minister of Finance on 13 January. It is envisaged that it will provide support to approximately 280,000 individuals.

Constituents will be eligible for this payment if, during the qualifying week from **Monday 13 December to Sunday 19 December 2021** inclusive, they were resident in Northern Ireland and were in receipt of one or more of the following benefits:

- Pension Credit;
- Universal Credit;
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance;
- Income-based Jobseekers Allowance; or
- Income Support.

Payments will be made to individuals. However, individual living in care homes are not eligible for the payment.



The Committee for Communities recently received a **briefing from the Department for Communities on the details of the Energy Support Schemes** (meeting of 27 January 2022). This may provide further clarification on issues for constituency staff, e.g. on eligibility and operational roll-out. The briefing can be viewed on [NI Assembly TV](#) (see 32.07 onwards).

The Emergency Fuel Payment Scheme

The [Emergency Fuel Payment Scheme](#) is a **crisis fund** operated by Bryson Charitable Group. It is for households in immediate need who **may be at risk of disconnection or who have been disconnected** from their energy supply. The £2m scheme was [announced](#) by the Minister for Communities on 29 December 2021.

The scheme will provide **one-off support of up to £100** worth of electricity, gas or oil. Applications can be made up until 31 March 2022. The scheme can provide support **only once** to an eligible household. Further information on the scheme, including the eligibility criteria, and the application process is available from the Bryson Charitable Group website [here](#). Please note that there is a daily limit to the number of applications to the scheme and applicants will be required to provide evidence that they meet the eligibility criteria.

Applications are made using an [online form](#) which will be available from 9am and 6pm Monday to Thursday and 9am on Friday. There is a limit to the number of daily applications to the scheme¹. If the slots have been filled users will receive a notification to “Please try again at the next opening slot”. It may be advisable for constituents, or for people assisting them, to carefully read the eligibility criteria and have supporting documentation at hand before embarking on the application process.

Please keep checking the website for any further information or support on accessibility for people who do not have the capacity to complete an online form. Note also that an Assembly Question [[AQW 27833/17-22](#)] answered on 11 January 2022 indicated that Bryson Care confirmed that it was making hard-copy versions of the application available. It further states that these are being distributed to voluntary and community sector organisations to enable support for individuals when completing applications. It also states that Bryson Care is making “regular changes and improvements to help the scheme operate better”.



The scheme experienced operational difficulties in the first few weeks of its introduction. The Committee for Communities requested an urgent briefing of this issue which was provided by DfC on 11 January 2022. This can be viewed on [NI Assembly TV](#) (see 49.38 onwards). An update of the scheme was also provided by the Minister for Communities in answer to an [Oral Question](#) on the 18 January 2022. The Committee also received a **briefing from the Department for Communities on the details of the Energy Support**

¹ Information extracted from the Bryson Charitable Group website [3 February 2020].
<https://www.brysongroup.org/news/emergency-fuel-payment-scheme>

Schemes (meeting of 27 January 2022). The briefing can be viewed on [NI Assembly TV](#) (see 32.07 onwards).

Eligibility for both schemes?

An Assembly Question [[AQW 28181/17-22](#)] answered on 25 January 2022 enquired as to whether people who are eligible for the Energy Payment Support Scheme will also be eligible for the Emergency Fuel Payment Scheme. In response, the Minister stated that:

“If people who are eligible for the Energy Payment Support Scheme find themselves in this circumstance (for example before they receive the payment) they could apply to the Emergency Fuel Payment Scheme where their application will be assessed by Bryson Care (the Scheme operator)”.



Several MLAs have submitted Assembly Questions to the Minister on the schemes including eligibility criteria, the potential for further support, commencement of the Energy Payment Support scheme etc. Responses, when available, can be searched for [here](#).

2 Other heating payments and energy efficiency schemes

There are a number of other payments available to help with heating costs (i.e. the **Winter Fuel Payment** and **Cold Weather Payment**) as well as schemes for energy efficiency (i.e. **Affordable Warmth Scheme** and **Boiler Replacement Scheme**).

Winter Fuel Payment

[Winter Fuel Payment](#) is payable to those born on or before 26 September 1955. An eligible person may be able to claim between £100 and £300 to help pay for heating bills. A person will usually receive this automatically if they are eligible and receive State Pension or another social security benefit (not Housing Benefit, Child Benefit or Universal Credit). If a person is eligible but does not get paid automatically, they will need to make a claim. Provided below are some useful links if you think a constituent is eligible for the payment but has not yet applied, or if an eligible constituent has not yet received their payment.

The [NI Direct website](#) states that the **deadline for a person to make a claim for winter 2021 to 2022 is 31 March 2022**. However, most payments are made

automatically in November and December and most people will have received payment for winter 2021 to winter 2022.

The NI Direct website includes useful information on:

- [Who qualifies for Winter Fuel Payment](#)
- [Making a claim for Winter Fuel Payment](#)
- [Winter Fuel Payment and Rates](#)
- [Reporting a change in circumstances](#) (including information on changes you must report)

Help and Support

The Winter Fuel Payment Centre accepts telephone claims from people who are eligible to receive Winter Fuel Payments for the first time. The contact details for the Centre are available [here](#) (there are arrangements in place for people who are deaf or hearing impaired and for those who cannot hear or speak on the phone). Opening hours are Monday to Friday 9.30 to 3.30pm. Claiming for the first time can also be made by post, details including a downloadable form are available [here](#).

Those who have claimed Winter Fuel Payment before, should get it automatically but queries can be sent to the Winter Fuel Payments Centre using an online form. Details are also available on the NI Direct website [here](#).

Cold Weather Payment

If a person is in receipt of certain benefits they could qualify for extra money for each week in which the average temperature in their areas is recorded as, or forecast to be, zero degrees Celsius or below over seven consecutive days. This is known as a [Cold Weather Payment](#). These payments are made automatically if a person receives a qualifying benefit and live in a postcode area which meets the required temperature to trigger the payment.

A [Cold Weather Payment Checker](#) is available on the NI Direct website for you to check if your constituents postcode is in an area due to receive payments triggered by cold weather between 1 November 2021 and 31 March 2022.

Cold Water Payment is payable at a rate of £25 for each seven day period of very cold weather between 1 November and 31 March. The payment should be made into the same bank or building society as a person's other benefit payments.

Eligibility

Cold Weather payments may be available for people on certain benefits (e.g. Pension Credit and *some* of the following claimants – Income Support and

income-based Jobseeker's claimants, income-related Employment and Support Allowance claimants, Support for Mortgage Interest claimants. Universal Credit claimants who are not employed or self-employed and have a health condition or disability and have limited capability for work or have a child under five living with them. Detailed information on eligibility is provided on the NI Direct website [here](#).

Help and Support

The benefit should be paid automatically. However, if a person does not receive their payment the [NI Direct website](#) contains information on the appropriate contact point.

Affordable Warmth Scheme

The purpose of the [Affordable Warmth Scheme](#) is to address the effects of fuel poverty and energy efficiency. It is a targeted scheme aimed at those areas where fuel poverty levels are highest. The scheme is delivered by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the 11 local councils on behalf of the Department for Communities.

The scheme may be available to constituents who:

- Live in Northern Ireland;
- Own and occupy their property as their main home or rent from a private landlord; and
- Have a total gross annual income of less than £23,000.

The [Northern Ireland Housing Executive website](#) provides further detailed information:

- How the scheme works
- Inspecting the property
- The Technical Assessment
- How do I know what work I can do?
- When can I start work?
- What help is available?
- How much grant-aid can I get?
- Who can do the work?
- Private Sector Tenants

Boiler Replacement Scheme

The [Boiler Replacement Scheme](#) is open to owner-occupiers whose gross household income is less than £40,000 and who have an inefficient boiler of at least 15 years old. A grant of up to £1,000 is available depending on total gross

annual income. The scheme is not available to tenants living in social or private rented housing.

The grant is available to help with:

- Replacing an inefficient boiler with a more energy efficient condensing boiler or gas boiler;
- Switching from oil to gas; or
- Switching to a wood pellet boiler.

For those earning over £20,000 but less than £40,000 the grant is £400 for the boiler but will rise to £500 if controls are installed.

Further information on the Boiler Replacement Scheme is available from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive website [here](#). It provides details on:

- Who is eligible;
- How much grant aid is available;
- How income is worked out for the purposes of the scheme;
- The type of boiler that can be installed; and
- Contact details for local grants offices.

NIHE Twitter: <https://twitter.com/nihecommunity>

NIHE Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/housingexecutive/>

3 Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme (NISEP)

The [Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme](#) (NISEP) is an £8 million fund, collected from both domestic and commercial energy customers through a public service obligation. The current schemes are running from **April 2021 to March 2022**. The [Energy Saving Trust](#) is the programme administrator for Northern Ireland on behalf of the [Utility Regulator for Northern Ireland](#).

All schemes run on financial year basis and there are currently 12 scheme managers delivering these schemes. Details of the list of NISEP Schemes 2021/22 is available [here](#) and on the Utility Regulator website [here](#). The framework document for 2022/23 is available [here](#). Each scheme has its own target customers and eligibility criteria and some of the schemes include “whole house solutions”, i.e. in which heating and energy efficiency measures are considered for the property.

Households may benefit from the NISEP (it primarily targets vulnerable and low-income customers) with funding being used for energy efficiency schemes such as:

- [Boiler upgrade](#)
- [Remote smart heating controls](#)
- [Radiator panels](#)
- [Draught proofing](#)
- [LED light bulbs](#)
- [Hot water tank jacket](#)
- [Water widgets](#)



Information on how to apply is available from the **Energy Saving Trust** website [here](#). If you wish to discuss with an energy advisor, you can contact the [Northern Ireland Energy Advice service](#) online; by freephone on 0800 111 4455 or by email at NIenergyadvice@nihe.gov.uk.

The **Energy Savings Trust** [website](#) also contains advice and information on making homes energy efficiency, reducing home heating loss and [lowering household energy bills](#).

Energy Savings Trust Twitter: <https://twitter.com/EnergySvgTrust>

Energy Savings Trust Facebook:
<https://www.facebook.com/EnergySavingTrust/>

4 Sources of advice and information on heating and energy efficiency

NI Energy Advice

The [NI Energy Advice](#) service is provided by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Its webpages contain information on:

- On energy efficiency grants (i.e. the Affordable Warmth Scheme and Boiler Replacement Scheme).
- Oil Buying Clubs
- Switching energy supplier
- Renewable Energy
- Insulation

- Advice on how to save energy and money.

Information on how to contact the NI Energy Advice service is available [here](#) and [here](#).

The Consumer Council

The [Consumer Council](#) provides free, independent advice and support for consumers and businesses in Northern Ireland. It has a range of interactive tools that will be of help to both constituents and constituency offices including a:

- [Home Budgeting Tool](#)
- [Home Energy Price Comparison Tool](#)
- A weekly [Home Heating Oil Price Checker](#)
- An [appliance cost checker](#) which provides an indication of how much domestic electrical appliances are costing to run.

The Consumer Council have also provided advice and information on budgeting for energy -see '[6 ways to boost your energy budget and make it stretch further](#)'

The Consumer Council Twitter: <https://twitter.com/ConsumerCouncil>

The Consumer Council Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/consumercouncilni/>

Energy Savings Trust

The **Energy Savings Trust** [website](#) also contains advice and information on making homes energy efficiency, reducing home heating loss and [lowering household energy bills](#).

Energy Savings Trust Twitter: <https://twitter.com/EnergySvgTrust>

Energy Savings Trust Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/EnergySavingTrust/>

National Energy Action

[National Energy Action](#) is a national fuel poverty charity working across England, Wales and Northern Ireland to ensure that everyone is warm and safe at home. It has a webpage providing advice on '[help with energy costs in Northern Ireland](#)' (which is also available in an [information leaflet](#)).

It also contains information the on the Belfast [Warm and Well](#) project which is coordinated by NEA. It operates across all areas of Belfast and is supported by the Public Health Agency and Belfast Community Planning Partnership. The

project is available to vulnerable people who are finding it difficult to keep their home warm. Contact details are available [here](#).



National Energy Action NI in Partnership with the Consumer Council are offering **free interactive Energy Efficiency webinars in February and March** further information including booking information is available [here](#). The webinars will include useful tips and advice on e.g. how to make energy go further, how to make savings on bills, low-cost and no-cost energy efficiency tips, comparing and switching energy suppliers etc.

National Energy Action UK Twitter: https://twitter.com/NEA_UKCharity

National Energy Action UK Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/Nationalenergyaction>

National Energy Action NI Twitter: https://twitter.com/NEA_NIreland

NI Fuel Poverty Coalition Twitter: <https://twitter.com/fuelpovertyni>

5 Fuel poverty and energy efficiency - local council and community initiatives

Local councils in Northern Ireland help to deliver the Affordable Warmth Scheme. However, a number of councils offer additional support in the form of oil stamp schemes and/or bulk buying oil clubs. Some council websites also provide advice and information on energy efficiency and fuel poverty.

Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council website provides information on the **Oil Stamp scheme** in which house householders can buy £5 oil stamps from local retailers and council premises to help them budget and spread the cost of home heating oil. **The website also states that it has been working with a number of local community clubs to set up 'Community Bulk Buying Oil Clubs'** that will co-ordinate orders for domestic heating oil in an area. There is also information on tackling home heating oil theft. Further information on these initiatives is available on the council website [here](#).

Belfast City Council website contains a range of information on home heating including information on its **fuel stamp scheme called 'Stay Warm'** which includes a list of retailers and oil companies participating in the scheme. Further details are available to download [here](#).

Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council 'Keep Cosy' oil stamp scheme is designed to help householders save for heating oil by

spreading the stamps over time. Further information on the scheme including a list of participating retailers and oil suppliers is available to download from the council's website [here](#).

Strabane Community Project provides a [Fuel Stamp Scheme](#). Further information can be found on the Scheme's Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/fuelstamp/>)

Fermanagh and Omagh District Council in association with National Energy Action is hosting a free [online webinar](#) 'All you need to you about Fuel Poverty' on Monday 1 March 2020 at 10am. The purpose of the webinar is to provide tailored support to local community groups and organisations operating in the Fermanagh District Council area.

Mid & East Antrim Borough Council website has a section called "[Keeping Warm, Keeping Well](#)" that contains information on its Energy Efficiency Adviser service and oil stamp saving scheme and community oil buying clubs in the area.

Mid Ulster District Council website also contains information on the [Mid Ulster Fuel stamp scheme](#) and its energy [Efficiency Advisory Scheme](#).

Please note that this is not an exhaustive list. Constituency staff may need to verify with their local council(s) whether these schemes are still operational before referring constituents. Other councils may have schemes that are not advertised on their websites. You may wish to contact your local council for the latest information on what is available in their area.

6 Utility companies – useful information

Links to useful information published by a selection of utility companies in Northern Ireland is provided below. The Utility Regulator website provides [weblinks and contact details](#) for all domestic gas and electricity suppliers in Northern Ireland and information for constituents who are customers of the various suppliers can be sought from these websites.

Power NI

The website provides [helpful tips and practical advice](#) on maximising energy savings in the home. It also provides answers to a range of [Frequently Asked Questions](#) including information on its free customer benefit entitlement check, the Customer Care Register for vulnerable customers, and information for customers having difficulties paying their bills. There is also a webpage setting out steps Power NI are taking to help customers who may be experiencing

difficulty paying their energy bills which is available [here](#). The website also contains FAQs on [pricing](#) and guidance [for economy 7 users](#).

The website states that anyone struggling to pay their bill should contact the Power NI Payment & Account Resolution Team on 028 90685853 or email dpar@powerni.co.uk including their account number. Further information on billing is provided in a list of FAQ [here](#).

Power NI Twitter: <https://twitter.com/PowerNI>

Power NI Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/PowerNI/>

SSE Airtricity

The website has a [Code of Practice](#) on the efficient use of gas which offers energy saving tips and advice. There are also [Codes of Practice](#) on the provision of services for older people and those who are chronically sick or disabled; complaints handling and services for prepayment meter customers. There is also a list of FAQs on issues such as tariff changes and understanding your bill.

SSE Airtricity also have an [Energy Care Scheme](#) for people of pensionable age, the disabled and/or chronically sick in SSE Airtricity may provide certain services free of charge including free natural gas safety checks, nominated contacts, special controls and taps etc.

There is also a [Code of Practice](#) of the payment of bills that provides information on payment methods, domestic tariffs and direct debits etc. There is also a [webpage](#) for those experiencing difficulties paying their bill that contains information on disconnection and reconnection. Those experiencing affordability issues can contact them on 0345 900 5253 or write to:

Credit Control Manager
SSE Airtricity Gas (NI) Ltd.
3rd Floor Millennium House
19-25 Great Victoria Street
Belfast
Northern Ireland
BT2 7AQ.

Airtricity Twitter: <https://twitter.com/sseairtricity>

Airtricity Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/sseairtricity>

Firmus Energy

The Firmus Energy website includes various [Codes of Practice](#) e.g. on efficient use of energy, the payment of bills, provision of services for older people and those who are chronically sick and/or disabled.

The Firmus Energy website provides a series of [Frequently Asked Questions](#) on Billing and Payments including [information](#) for those having difficulty paying for their natural gas. The website states that customers should let them know if they are having difficulties as soon as possible and that it may be able to offer alternative payment methods that suit their circumstances by contacting 0330 024 9000 or by emailing creditcontrol@firmusenergy.co.uk.

Firmus Energy Twitter <https://twitter.com/firmusenergy>



Note that the [Utility Regulator](#) and [The Consumer Council](#) has prepared a user friendly [checklist with a collection of questions and answers](#) that aim to provide practical information to consumers concerning their rights in relation to the energy sector. It includes information on issues such as contracts and billing, obligations, prices and tariffs, complaints handling, consumer representation and unfair practices. A full copy of the Energy Checklist is available to download [here](#).

The Utility Regulator website also provides information for consumers on [getting the best deal](#) on utility bills, understanding your [electricity prices](#), and [consumer protection](#).

Utility Regulator Twitter: <https://twitter.com/UREGNI>

The Consumer Council Twitter: <https://twitter.com/ConsumerCouncil>

7 Maximising household income

It is important to ensure your constituents are receiving all the benefits and payments that they are entitled to. The NI Direct website provides information on [benefits and financial support](#). There are also a range of extra financial support payments that may be available to people who are in need of short-term financial support. Information on these payments is available from the NI Direct website [here](#) including eligibility and applications.

The [Make the Call Service](#) can also provide benefit eligibility checks it can be contacted on freephone 0800 2321271 or by emailing makethecall@dfcni.gov.uk. Phone lines are open Monday to Friday from 9.00am to 5pm (excluding public holidays). Please note that the NI Direct website states that the Department for Communities is experiencing a high volume of calls and

it may take longer to answer a call. There is also an option to contact the service using an online request form or to request a call back by text. Also provided are details on [contacting the service](#) for those who are or have hearing, language or speech problems.

Some independent advice organisations also provide benefit entitlement checks e.g. Advice NI and Age NI. Some also provide advice, information and support on issues such as debt and money management. The next section of this constituency casework guide provides information on independent advice and information providers.

8 Other sources of independent advice and information

Provided below is a selection of independence advice and information providers.

Advice NI

[Advice NI](#) provides help and advice on a wide range of issues such as benefits, money and personal debt. They can be contacted on freephone 0800 915 4604 or by email at advice@adviceni.net. There is a wide range of tools, resources and guides on issues such as money management and debt, see [here](#).

Advice NI members are spread across Northern Ireland and you can find contact details for your local advice providers [here](#).

Advice NI Twitter: <https://twitter.com/AdviceNI>

Advice NI Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/AdviceNI>

Age NI

[Age NI](#) has a range of advice and information leaflets on '[money matters](#)' including benefits and entitlements, pensions, debt and savings, and income and tax. Its '[Winter Wrapped Up](#)' guide includes advice and information for older people on keeping well, warm and in touch during the winter months.

Age NI also provide a free phone advice service offering advice, information and practical support on a wide range of issues including welfare benefits, housing and health. Tel: 0808 808 7575 (Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm).

Age NI Twitter: https://twitter.com/Age_NI

Age NI Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/agenicharity>

Housing Rights

The Housing Rights [Housing Advice NI](#) website contains a wealth of advice and information on housing issues. It contains a [recent update](#) for people who are experiencing difficulties paying their bill including information on budgeting skills, getting the most out of your income, private rented sector rent arrears, social housing rent arrears, and signposting to organisations who can help with debt advice.

Information on how a constituent can speak to a Housing Rights advisor is available [here](#). There is also a live chat function available on the website.

Housing Rights Twitter: <https://twitter.com/HousingRightsNI>

Housing Rights Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/HousingRightsNI>

9 Keeping an eye on future developments

The Department for the Economy has recently published the [Northern Ireland Energy Strategy 'Path to Net Zero Energy'](#). This includes issues such energy affordability, energy reduction, energy efficiency and retrofitting. It is worth keeping a watching brief on the strategy and its action plan in terms of the financing of domestic energy efficiency measures. Additionally, the Minister for Communities has indicated that a new Fuel Poverty Strategy is being developed which will align with the NI Executive's Energy Strategy and [Green Growth Strategy](#)².

² Assembly Question [AQW 24259/17-22](#).

This information is provided to MLAs in support of their Assembly duties and is not intended to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual or organisation. Whilst we strive to ensure that the information provided here is up to date, the information provided by external websites referred to may change frequently. This guide should not be relied upon as providing legal or professional advice, nor as a substitute for it. A suitably qualified professional should be consulted if specific advice or information is required.

The Research and Information Service is available to discuss the content of this briefing with Members and their staff, but not with the general public.