COVID-19 / Coronavirus — Update on Delivery and Operations

At National Energy Action NI, our priority is to ensure that everyone is able to live in a warm home. This remains important, particularly when people may be spending more time at home or facing uncertainties regarding income.

We are closely monitoring the current situation regarding COVID-19 / Coronavirus and following the latest Government advice. This means that we will be making some temporary alterations to how we deliver our work, including cancelling events and pausing face-to-face contact. NEA remains open, however, all staff are working from home and we are able to continue the majority of our operations, including maintaining a Telephone Service and developing training via e-learning. Our policy and campaigns work continues, including seeking extra protections for vulnerable energy consumers during these challenging times.

While we will be continuing to operate a phone service as normal, we have made the difficult decision to temporarily limit our face-to-face advice provision to make sure we can properly protect our clients and staff from any risk. We will be working closely with local organisations to support local householders in the community through our Warm and Well Project, where it is possible to do so, without causing unnecessary risks to health for vulnerable households.

In the meantime, we would suggest you contact staff via email or phone as letters may take some time to be answered; contact details can be found on page ten.

The Consumer Council has created a dedicated webpage which is regularly updated with additional support on essential services including home energy: https://www.consumercouncil.org.uk/coronavirus.

Please stay safe and follow Public Health and Government guidelines.

Warm regards

Ms. Pat Austin
Director, NEA NI
Chair, NI Fuel Poverty Coalition
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2019 culminated with another Westminster election ending another highly politically charged year. However, The New Approach Deal resulted in the restoration of the political institutions in January 2020. The new Ministers have a busy time ahead tackling the severe hardship facing Health and Education, and progressing key strategies including the Fuel Poverty Strategy.

In recent months, both the Department for Communities (DfC) and the Department for the Economy (DfE) have started to have discussions with key stakeholders, including NEA, on new strategies for fuel poverty and energy respectively, with the DfE most recently putting forth a Call for Evidence for the Energy Strategy, with a view to presenting a draft strategy for presentation to a future Minister by the end of 2020.

This Call for Evidence is a strategic document of key importance, which outlines the unprecedented changes ahead in order to achieve the challenging decarbonisation targets required. It is the beginning of an on-going public engagement process to set a pathway to how to achieve these targets and the role and impact on the consumer. NEA’s role will be to continue to advocate for the consumer and ensure that this transition is just and fair, and those on lower incomes are not left behind or pay proportionately more for this transition. As such this strategy needs to dovetail closely with any new Fuel Poverty Strategy to ensure a ‘Just Transition’.

The Fuel Poverty Coalition held a workshop on 10th March 2020 to consider the Call for Evidence as outlined in page eight.

Consultation Responses

While we steel ourselves for a busy year of strategies, there were plenty of consultations in the preceding months to keep us busy. During the summer, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (NIAC) held an Inquiry into the Welfare Mitigations policy. We provided a response due to the negative impact that the ending of the Welfare mitigations policy would bring about and the scale of this on fuel poor households.

We also submitted a response under the Cliff Edge Coalition. The Cliff Edge Coalition was formed, following a policy paper that warned of the impact of the mitigations payments ending in March 2020. The Coalition was initiated by key players in the welfare rights and housing sectors in Northern Ireland namely Housing Rights, Law Centre NI and Advice NI. The Coalition has now over 70 members from the third sector, trade union movement and physical and mental health sector, including NEA.

We also responded to the following Utility Regulator consultations:

- **Price Control for firmus energy (Supply) Ltd 2020-22** — July 2019
- **Framework Document for the Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme 2020-21** — Sept 2019
- **Review of the Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme (NISEP) & Energy Efficiency Provision** — Oct 2019
- **CPP Best Practice Frameworks - Call for Evidence** — Nov 2019
Policy Update

Fuel Poverty Monitor
The NEA annual Fuel Poverty Monitor this year concentrated on Government Fuel Poverty Strategies across the Four nations. Stakeholders were invited to take part in a Call for Evidence, which explored where we are now and where we want to be. Out-workings of the strategy in Northern Ireland include the key grant initiatives from the two key Departments of Communities and Economy. This provided an opportunity to recognise the strengths of the main grants but also acknowledge areas for improvement. The key recommendations for Northern Ireland were to implement an energy efficiency target; introduce a new Fuel Poverty Strategy and for fuel poor and energy efficiency schemes to remain focussed and targeted. To download the 2018/19 Fuel Poverty Monitor, please click here.

The Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme (NISEP) Review
Over the past year the Utility Regulator (UR) has embarked on a substantial review of the Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme (NISEP). The NISEP was due to be replaced five years ago and in the interim years a number of extensions have been instated to allow for a smooth transition until a new scheme is developed. At present, the scheme has been extended until 2022.

The UR collated a significant amount of evidence on the NISEP. This has entailed focus groups, qualitative interviews with stakeholders and last year’s Call for Evidence. Last year, the UR published a substantial discussion paper on the NISEP which will help define how any new programme will be delivered in the future. In addition to the paper, a packed stakeholder event in August was attended by all sectors enabling attendees to thrash out the key elements of the NISEP and voice opinion on what any new programme should look like.

NEA provided a response to the paper and our Energy Justice Campaign has long advocated retention of the programme until such times that a new progressive scheme is implemented. The discussion paper posed a number of questions as to what the scheme should contain, funding mechanisms and delivery. This enabled stakeholders from across the sectors to put forward ideas and proposals seeking to improve the programme. Our recommendations include:

- Energy efficiency education should be incorporated into the key objectives;
- The retention of ringfencing for priority groups i.e. those at risk or living in fuel poverty;
- Due cognisance of the forthcoming decarbonisation transition and its impact on low income households;
- Tackle low take up areas e.g. rural;
- Explore innovation solutions for off-gas and hard to treat homes; and
- Implement a triage approach for those in immediate crisis.

NEA believes that the NISEP has proved invaluable since its inception as the Energy Efficiency Levy back in 1997. We assert that it is possible to provide an energy efficiency and carbon reduction programme, which simultaneously tackles fuel poverty and with the implementation of the NICE NG6 guidelines, save lives and improve health and well-being. The correlation between health and cold homes is firmly endorsed by academia.

We look forward to working with the UR to explore the next steps.
Energy in the Home Workshops by County 2019-20

National Energy Action (NEA) NI, supported by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) provides **FREE** two hour workshops on energy efficiency in the home for community groups throughout NI.

- From April 2019 to Present: 19 Energy in the Home Workshops were delivered to 439 participants.

- A range of groups undertook the workshop, such as Surestart, Action Mental Health (AMH) and many other community groups throughout Northern Ireland.

- The majority of workshops were delivered in County Down and County Antrim.

We are keen to ensure these workshops are delivered throughout all of Northern Ireland, so if you are based in Counties Tyrone, Armagh or Derry / Londonderry and would like further information, please contact our Training Officer, Nichola MacDougall on 028 9023 9909 or via email to: Nichola.MacDougall@nea.org.uk.
National Energy Action
Training Courses

NEA/City & Guilds Level 3 Award in Energy Awareness 6281-01
This training course is designed for people who wish to gain or further their knowledge of domestic energy efficiency and in particular, is aimed at those who are in a position to provide energy advice. Course participants come from a range of organisations including local Councils, voluntary organisations, energy companies and providers, and housing associations. The course consists of a one day examination, following the three days training and leads to the Level 3 City and Guilds 6281-01 qualification.

NEA/City & Guilds Level 2 Award in Fuel Debt Advice in the Community 6281-16 — (COMING SOON)
The one-day course is designed for frontline staff working with low-income and vulnerable households who may be in fuel debt or at risk from fuel debt. The course provides participants with an understanding of the causes of fuel debt, issues householders may face with meters, fuel statements, payment and tariff options. The course consists of an open book exam, which will take a maximum of three hours to complete.

Fuel Poverty and Energy Efficiency
This half day course provides participants with an understanding of fuel poverty including its causes and consequences, and how improving energy efficiency can help provide affordable warmth.

Understanding Fuel Poverty and Health
This three hour course is aimed at those wanting to learn more about fuel poverty and its links with physical and mental wellbeing. It includes an introduction to energy efficiency grants. The course will look at the causes and impacts of fuel poverty with a focus on the health impacts.

Tailored Courses
We can also deliver bespoke courses, and design courses to help meet particular business and training needs.

ONLINE TRAINING COURSES COMING SOON!
Please email Stephanie Ward to be added to the mailing list.

For more information including training fees, please contact:
Nichola MacDougall
Training Officer
National Energy Action (NEA) NI
1 College House
Citylink Business Park
Albert Street
Belfast  t: 028 9023 9909
BT12 4HQ  e: Nichola.MacDougall@nea.org.uk

Accredited to 2015 Standards
NEA/City & Guilds Level 3 Award in Energy Awareness 6281-01

This three-day course leading to the NEA/City & Guilds 6281-01 Level 3 Award in Energy Awareness has been running for 30 years reaching more than 26,000 people. This remains NEA’s most popular course for energy efficiency advisers.

Organisations such as firmus energy, Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) and Bryson FutureSkills, local Councils and Industry continue to recognise the benefits of this training for their staff, as it enhances their understanding of fuel poverty and energy efficiency issues, which in turn provides a better service to their customers.

firmus energy

From 2006, firmus energy have committed to send all their staff on the Energy Awareness training. In the last year, 40 firmus energy employees achieved the NEA/City & Guilds Energy Awareness Level 3 qualification.

Testimonials from firmus energy staff:

“The whole course was excellent and very informative.”

“I really enjoyed the whole course as it was relevant to work and personal life.”

“I can provide better advice when dealing with queries.”

“Very useful and interesting course. Hope to provide some information I have learnt to customers.”

In September 2019, firmus energy organised a certificate presentation for their staff to congratulate them on achieving this Level 3 qualification.

Richard McErlean (HR Administrator) receiving his Energy Awareness Certificate from Michael Scott (Managing Director, firmus energy), Pat Austin (Director, NEA NI and Nichola MacDougall (Training Officer, NEA NI)
Fuel Poverty Coalition Update

The Northern Ireland Fuel Poverty Coalition (FPC) Manifesto for Warmth was updated and reissued last year for the local government elections. Our key asks remain unchanged:

- Make energy efficiency an infrastructure priority;
- Establish a new fuel poverty strategy;
- Save lives by implementing NICE NG6 guidelines;
- Regulate the oil industry; and
- Ensure current and future schemes are effectively targeted.

The manifesto was widely disseminated to elected representatives and stakeholders. To download the most recent version of the Manifesto for Warmth, please click here.

FPC members were also provided with the opportunity to take part in the recent Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme (NISEP) discussion paper earlier this month. NEA NI, the FPC Secretariat, provided a template response in harmony with the key asks.

We are pleased to see our membership increase to 224 active members and always welcome new members from across the sectors. To become a member and support the FPC, please sign up here.

Energy Strategy Consultation Workshop

In March, 50 members of the FPC came together for a workshop to prepare a response to the Department for the Economy (DfE) Energy Strategy Call for Evidence. Four keys issues that relate to fuel poverty in Northern Ireland were identified in the context of an energy transition to zero carbon. Members worked on the key aspects of energy policy that they felt impacted on the issue of fuel poverty, and other broader considerations pertinent to the issue.

The four topics deemed of high significance to the FPC were:

1. Energy Efficiency
2. Adoption of New Technologies for Heat
3. Affordability and Who Pays
4. The Role of the Consumer in the Transition

A response has been collated and submitted to the DfE, which reflected the insights and contributions from the members of the FPC. To receive a copy of this response, please contact Lucy Cochrane or Stephanie Ward.
The Zero-In on NI-Heat project is a multidisciplinary, women-led project to give alternative views on the opportunities and barriers towards a zero carbon emission heat sector in Northern Ireland (NI).

Ulster University (UU) is the lead partner with the Steering Committee encapsulating female representatives from key organisations within the NI heat sector, including the Department for the Economy (DfE), the Utility Regulator (UR), a renewable industry group (NIRIG), the transmission & distribution system operators (NI Electricity Networks and SONI), NEA Northern Ireland, the Consumer Council, and a public affairs consultancy (Stratagem).

Four stakeholder engagement workshops were organised for this project. Workshops which aimed at identifying the barriers and opportunities to zero carbon heating involved a wide range of stakeholders and focused on the following topics: (i) domestic, (ii) non-domestic, (iii) infrastructure and (iv) energy policy and regulation for heat decarbonisation in NI.

A range of visions for the future heat decarbonisation pathways have been suggested by the NI stakeholders through our expert engagement workshops. One of the prominent visions is that heat decarbonisation in the NI cannot be achieved without consideration of the NI's vulnerable/fuel poor consumers.

Dominated by oil heating and not very efficient houses, Northern Ireland has one of the highest ratings of fuel poverty and faces a very challenging target to decarbonise its heating sector.

Low carbon technologies will require significant investments. Therefore, the challenge is how can households in fuel poverty afford these investments? Another very important aspect of the future heat decarbonisation challenge is requirement for significant investments in the infrastructure, i.e. upgrade of electrical networks, building district heating or infrastructure for transporting “green gases”. Northern Ireland must avoid a situation where everyone including people in poverty has to pay for infrastructure, but only a selected portion of the population benefit from these investments through their electric vehicles, solar panels and low carbon heating technologies.

A range of solutions have been discussed by the stakeholders to protect vulnerable people. General taxation vs taxation on electricity; upgrading of energy efficiency standards to the highest levels for vulnerable people; targeted assistance are examples. The socialised costs of energy bills or taxes should be considered when introducing low-carbon heating technologies into NI’s energy market.

One of the biggest opportunities in the heat decarbonisation agenda is unlocking consumer flexibility. Fuel poor customers could be those that would be the most motivated to participate in the market and offer their flexibility in return for reduced energy bills.

Still, it will be important to educate consumers on the environmental and technological benefits of low-carbon heating systems. Other than reducing the amount of eco-pollution due to greenhouse gases, low-carbon heating systems have been proven to effectively heat buildings and deliver health benefits.

Multi-vector approaches combining the range of technical solutions and innovative business models, investor engagement, collaborative efforts between wide range of stakeholders and clear coordination through energy policy and regulatory bodies is needed to achieve efficient heat decarbonisation in NI.
Useful Contacts

Age NI
080 8808 7575

Advice NI
028 9064 5919

Volunteer Now
028 9023 2020

Engage with Age
028 9073 5696

Consumer Council NI
080 0121 6022

Housing Rights Service
028 9024 5640

Northern Ireland Water
0345 744 0088

Welfare Reform Helpline
0808 802 0020

NIE Networks
Customer Helpline
0345 764 3643

Contact NEA NI

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