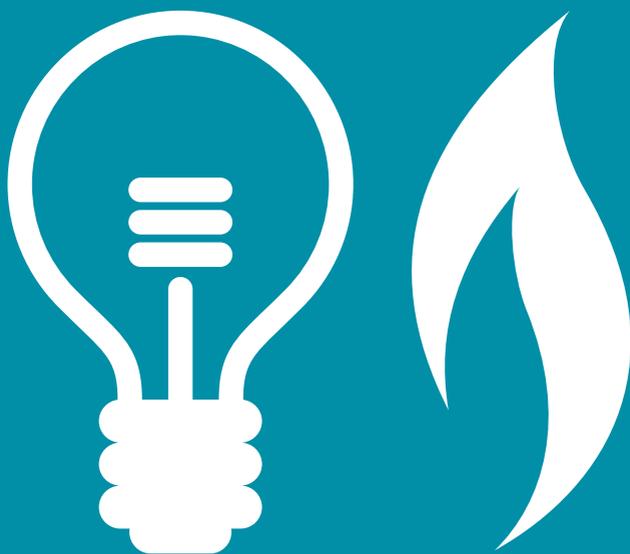


switch on

for Small Businesses and
Not-For-Profit Organisations.



The Consumer Council Energy Information Guide
for small businesses and not-for-profit organisations.

Contents

1. Connecting and Emergencies	4
2. Understanding your Energy Contract	6
3. Switching	8
4. Bills and Tariffs	9
5. Energy Efficiency	12
6. Energy Brokers	13
7. How to Complain	14

1. Connecting and Emergencies

Electricity

If you wish to **connect** to the electricity network or your electricity goes off, you should contact **NIE Networks**. It is the company that owns and maintains the meters, cables and pylons that deliver electricity to your business or organisation. NIE Networks is also responsible for reading all electricity meters. You can contact **NIE Networks** on 03457 643 643.

If you have a query about your **bill, contract or tariff** you should contact your electricity supplier. The following companies supply electricity to small businesses in Northern Ireland:

3T Power: 0333 600 8800	Electric Ireland: 0345 600 5335	Power NI: 03457 455 455
Budget Energy: 0800 012 1177	Energia: 0345 073 0099	SSE Airtricity: 0845 603 4444
Click Energy: 0800 107 0732	Go Power: 028 8676 0600	Naturgy: 0113 3605 191

If you wish to switch electricity supplier, use The Consumer Council non-domestic online comparison tool at www.consumercouncil.org.uk to find the best deal.

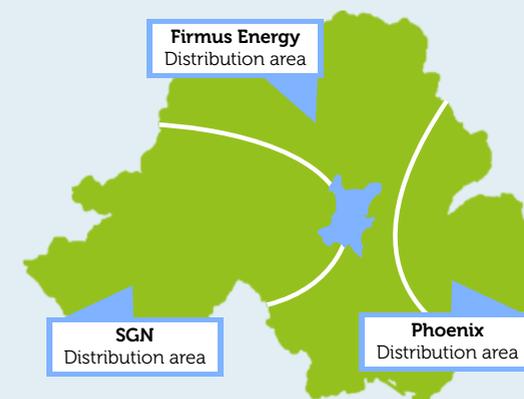
Natural gas

The natural gas network continues to grow in Northern Ireland, but it is not available in every area. If you are considering **converting to gas**, you should contact one of the following companies depending on where your business is located:

Firmus Energy:
0800 032 4567

Phoenix Natural Gas:
03454 55 55 55

Scotia Gas Network:
0800 975 7774



If you smell gas or suspect that there is a **gas leak** in your premises you should contact the Northern Ireland Gas Emergency Service on **0800 002 001**, which is available 24 hours a day 365 days a year.

If you have a query about your **bill, contract or tariff** you should contact your gas supplier.

Electric Ireland: 0345 600 5335	Firmus Energy: 0800 032 4567	Flogas: 028 9073 0277
Go Power: 028 8676 0600	SSE Airtricity Gas: 0345 850 8940	

If you wish to **switch** your gas supplier, use The Consumer Council non-domestic online comparison tool to see what suppliers are available in your area and to check the best prices.

2. Understanding your Energy Contract

Check all the **Terms and Conditions** of your contract and ensure you understand what you sign up to. Unlike with domestic consumers, there is **no cooling off period** for businesses. You need to be certain about your supplier and the deal it is providing as you cannot change your mind after signing a new contract.

Things to look out for:

- Check the **length** of the contract, typically between 12 and 24 months, or it could be open ended;
- Check what **notice** must be given to your supplier to terminate your contract (some suppliers ask for up to 150 days);
- Check if there are any **penalties** for things such as late payment or to cancel the contract early;
- Ask how the **price** is made up and calculated, including VAT, pass-through costs, discounts and all other charges and levies;
- Check if the price you have agreed is **variable or fixed** (this is very similar to how mortgage rates work);
- Check what **payment methods** are available and if you will have to pay a security deposit;
- Understand what will happen at the **end of your contract**. You may be able to negotiate a new contract or switch supplier, otherwise your supplier will roll you automatically to the standard tariff;
- Ask if your supplier can change the **Terms and Conditions** of your contract and what will happen if it does.

Other useful things to remember:

- It is very important you keep a copy of your contract.
- Energy contracts may preclude electricity and gas companies from certain liabilities, for example unforeseen circumstances such as loss of revenue if the electricity or gas goes off. You should consider taking out insurance to cover your business in case such things happen.
- If your business is moving into new premises, or vacating your existing ones, you should inform your electricity and/or gas supplier of the date you are leaving or moving in. Otherwise, you may be liable for the energy that the new, or previous tenant, has used. You should also provide a meter read to your supplier when you leave, and a forwarding address for the final bill.



3. Switching

By switching energy supplier you may **save money** and get a **better service**. Small businesses and not-for-profit organisations in Northern Ireland can choose from nine electricity suppliers (see page 4 of this guide) and up to five gas suppliers (depending on the location of your business), (see page 5 of this guide).

Small businesses and not-for-profit organisations can compare electricity and gas prices and check what suppliers are in your area using **The Consumer Council's** non-domestic online energy **price comparison tool**. Simply visit **www.consumerCouncil.org.uk**. Our website also has an online energy price comparison tool for domestic consumers.

You should find out from your supplier if, and when, you can switch, and how much notice you must give to terminate your contract. Also you should clear any debt in your account before you switch, otherwise you may have to pay an early exit fee, and your supplier may block the switch.

Currently energy suppliers are not obliged to notify you when your contract is due to expire. Therefore, you should set a reminder of the date when your contract ends so that you can negotiate a new one or switch supplier (similar to how car insurance operates). The Utility Regulator has a Marketing Code of Practice for Business Customers (COP)¹ that protects you from mis-selling or other unfair practices from energy suppliers or sales agents acting on their behalf.

The Utility Regulator's COP does not cover energy brokers. You should contact The Consumer Council on 0800 121 6022 if you experience any problems in this area.

¹ Available on www.uregni.gov.uk

4. Bills and Tariffs

There are typically three types of **electricity tariffs** for small businesses and not-for-profit organisations. Each tariff requires a specific type of meter.

- **Popular** with one flat rate (Code T031);
- **Day & night** with two different unit rates, a cheaper one during nights (Codes T032 or T034); and
- **Weekender** with two different unit rates, a cheaper one during nights and weekends (Code T033).

It is important that you are on the type of tariff that suits your business type. Otherwise you may end up paying more than you should for your electricity. For example, businesses with typical opening times of Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm, should be on the popular tariff, whereas a newsagent with refrigeration units may save money on the day & night tariff. A hot food bar, pub, or restaurant may save money on the weekender tariff, depending on their opening hours. You should contact your supplier for general advice about what tariff is best for your business.

When you shop around for your next contract, some suppliers may offer the choice between fixed and variable unit rates. A fixed energy tariff will guarantee the unit rate and standing charge that you pay for the duration of your contract. If you choose a variable tariff, the unit rate and standing charge can go up as well as down. Both options have advantages and disadvantages – see the table on the following page for a comparison.

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Fixed Energy Price	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You know the unit price of energy in advance. It provides better price stability than a variable offer. If wholesale prices go up you will benefit from the fixed lower price. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If wholesale prices go down you will still pay the fixed higher price. Typically you have to pay an exit fee if you wish to terminate a fixed energy price contract early. You are likely to be tied in for 12 to 24 months. The supplier may have the right to change your price under certain conditions.
Variable Energy Price	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If wholesale prices go down your unit price goes down also. Variable price contracts are less likely to tie you in for a long term. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Your unit price can go up over the duration of your contract. You will not be able to get an accurate forecast of energy costs for the contract period.

Gas tariffs for small businesses and not-for-profit organisations are known as IC1. Some suppliers charge one flat unit rate; others apply two. One will be for the first 2,000kWh that you use each year and one is for any units that you use above 2,000kWh. You do not have to pay a standing charge for your gas provided that you use a minimum of 1,678kWh per year.

Ask your electricity and/or gas supplier if it can offer you a discount, for example for paying by direct debit.

Prepayment meters are not available to small businesses or not-for-profit organisations. It is therefore important that you provide regular meter reads to your supplier and track what you spend on energy.

If you struggle to pay your energy bills and fall into arrears, contact your energy supplier to discuss your options.

Some suppliers may offer an online tool that will help you measure and track your energy costs.



5. Energy Efficiency

Improving the energy efficiency in your business premises will reduce the amount of energy you use. There are a number of **free and easy steps** that you can take. We have included some examples below:

1. If you are considering moving to new premises, check the **Energy Performance Certificate** of the building. This gives information on the energy efficiency of the building using a sliding scale from A (very efficient) to G (least efficient).
2. If you are upgrading or replacing electrical equipment, check that the new items carry a recognised **energy efficiency label** before you buy them, or use The Consumer Council's online Electrical Equipment Running Costs Calculator. This is available on www.consumerCouncil.org.uk.
3. Complete the **NI Business Info** energy efficiency checklist. This is available on www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk.
4. Introduce an end-of-day and end-of-week policy to **switch off** lights, computer monitors, office equipment and machinery.
5. Use **standby** and **power off** settings where possible.
6. Ask your supplier about **grants** available through the Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme (NISEP) scheme.
7. Some office equipment energy efficiency tips include:
 - a. Laptops use less electricity than desktops;
 - b. The faster your printer's speed, the more electricity it will use; and
 - c. Choose a vending or hot drinks machine that minimises the amount of water it uses, and set it at the lowest safe and efficient temperature.

For more information search for "energy efficiency" on the NI Business Info website, www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk.

6. Energy Brokers

Energy brokers shop around for energy deals on your behalf for a **fee or commission**. This could be a fee that you or the supplier have to pay them when completing the switch, or an add-on to your bill for every unit of electricity or gas that you use. It is important to discuss and negotiate this fee with your broker in advance and that you ask for an invoice or that the charges are clearly displayed in your energy bill.

You will need to grant the energy broker permission to act on your behalf. You can do this by providing it with a **Letter of Authority**. It must specify what tasks the broker can carry out on behalf of your business or organisation. These may include:

- Obtaining quotes;
- Accessing the information in your energy account;
- Serving notice of intention to switch supplier;
- Signing new energy contracts; and
- Making changes to your energy account, such as submitting VAT forms.

Northern Ireland Trading Standards Service is the organisation that deals with complaints about energy brokers and misleading marketing or mis-selling. You can contact it on **0300 123 6262** or email tss@economy-ni.gov.uk to report any issues.

7. How to Complain

If you have a complaint about your electricity or gas company, follow these simple steps:

1. Contact your electricity or gas supplier first. It should acknowledge or respond within 10 working days.
2. If you do not receive a response from your supplier, or the issue is not resolved satisfactorily, you should contact The Consumer Council. We have a complaints team that will investigate your complaint free of charge and keep you informed of any developments. Simply contact us on **0800 121 6022** or email **contact@consumercouncil.org.uk** and we can investigate your complaint on your behalf.

You can also contact The Consumer Council at any time for information and advice about any energy issue or other consumer issues in general.





Floor 3
Seatem House
28 - 32 Alfred Street
Belfast
BT2 8EN

Complaints line:

0800 121 6022

Tele/Textphone:

028 9025 1600

Fax:

028 9025 1663

Email:

contact@consumercouncil.org.uk

Web:

www.consumercouncil.org.uk

