



Review of NISEP Energy Efficiency Scheme Provision

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1. Executive summary

1.1 Introduction & background

The Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme (NISEP), managed by the Utility Regulator (UR), was set up as an energy efficiency initiative in 1997. Since 2002, 80% of the NISEP funding has been ring-fenced for energy efficiency measures in low income households, due to high levels of fuel poverty in Northern Ireland.. As part of the 2018 review of NISEP, the Consumer Council, in partnership with the Utility Regulator (UR) and Department for the Economy (DfE), commissioned Perceptive Insight to undertake qualitative research directed at investigating consumers' knowledge and attitudes toward energy efficiency programmes. The purpose of this research has been to:

- Determine consumer attitudes to current energy efficiency programme provisions in Northern Ireland; and
- Explore the benefits or otherwise of NISEP scheme participation.

1.2 Methodology

In order to assess the above objectives, Perceptive Insight undertook a comprehensive research study, consisting of the following:

- 12 focus groups with a range of householders across NI; and
- 6 semi-structured interviews with people who have had first-hand experience of the NISEP scheme.

1.3 Key themes from research findings

Discussions provided insight into attitudes towards energy efficiency, levels of awareness of energy efficiency schemes, and understanding and perceptions relating to energy efficiency provision across Northern Ireland including the funding of this provision. Outlined below are the headline findings from the research.

Attitudes to energy efficiency

- Overall participants were receptive to the message promoting energy efficiency, and many had taken steps/continued to take steps to reduce energy consumption within their home. Some of these actions were regular steps such as turning off lights and radiators. Others had installed insulation, new windows and/or new boilers.
- The main driver of these actions was to save money, although a few commented on the positive environmental effects.
- A few confirmed that they were deterred from making their home more energy efficient due to the outlay costs, which they could not afford in their current circumstances.

Awareness and understanding of schemes to promote energy efficiency

- Most were unfamiliar with any energy efficiency provisions available in Northern Ireland, including NISEP and its individually named schemes.
- Where there was awareness, this tended to be vague. A few mentioned a boiler replacement programme because they had previously heard of or availed of it but did not know the finer details of the scheme. Similarly, a few were aware of friends/family who had received help within insulation but did not know the details or the name of the scheme.
- These findings extend to programme participants themselves, who explained that they had come across the energy scheme they had applied to by chance. No programme participants were aware that the scheme they availed of is connected to NISEP.

Views of NISEP and its processes

- Programme participants provided positive feedback about the NISEP scheme that they had availed of. They reflected on a number of benefits linked with programme participation, including:
 - **A warmer home:** it was considered that the energy efficiency measure/s that were installed had improved their home's ability to generate and/or retain heat.
 - **Positive financial impact:** a number of those who were interviewed explained that they would not have been able to afford the energy efficiency measure/s without the help of the scheme, or that they have been able to save more money because of a reduced heat bill.
 - **Good standard of service:** participants reflected that the standard of service they received through NISEP was good or very good. Positive comments were made about the quality of the workmanship and efficiency, friendliness and tidiness of the workmen.
- Feedback from focus groups revealed a positive attitude toward NISEP, based on the perception that the schemes are likely to be helping those most in need. There was a lot of interest in what the scheme entailed. Indeed a number of participants confirmed that they would seek out more information about the scheme after taking part in the research.
- However, a number of drawbacks to the programme were considered. In the main these were linked to a limited understanding and awareness of how NISEP is managed/implemented. For example:
 - A few participants assumed that the application process would be lengthy and confusing, based on their experience of other government initiatives. Participants considered that this would be a deterrent, particularly to anyone whose heating system was broken beyond repair (one of the criteria for applying).
 - There was a degree of scepticism expressed in the focus groups, in relation to the scheme providers. A number expressed concern that providers might inflate their prices if they knew that the customer was eligible for funding through NISEP. They also assumed that if they had a gas system installed a condition would be that they remain a customer of the gas supplier. It should be noted however that feedback from programme participants did not reflect these concerns.
- Those in private rented accommodation commented that they would be reluctant to apply to a scheme that might cost them money as they would not want to put money into a home that they did not own. They felt that any application should be made by the landlord.

The funding model

- Both focus group and programme participants were unaware of the levy electricity users pay towards NISEP.
- The point was made by a few focus group participants that if they are contributing to the funding of NISEP then it is only fair to expect to know this and be aware of the scheme.
- Most felt the amount paid per year by the average household is fair.
- Participants were generally in favour that the scheme is tailored to those most in need of energy efficiency provision, although a few would have liked to see the eligibility criteria widened to take account of the ‘working poor’.
- A number indicated that they would be willing to pay more if certain scheme criteria were reviewed and/broadened (e.g. to include those living in an older home who may have poor but functional heating, but cannot apply against the “broken beyond repair” system criteria).

1.4 Concluding remarks

Findings from this research have provided insights into consumer attitudes toward energy efficiency provisions in Northern Ireland, and identified a number of benefits and drawbacks to participation in NISEP.

Attitudes toward NISEP and energy efficiency provision in NI

Feedback gained from focus group discussions and interviews with scheme participants revealed that in general, energy efficiency programmes in Northern Ireland are favourably viewed. This was underpinned by perceptions that:

- Energy-saving is desirable – it can help save households money and has a positive environmental impact; and
- Energy efficiency programmes are likely to be helping those most in need – Fuel poverty is a problem for vulnerable households in Northern Ireland (including low-income, older person and disability households).

While discussions pointed to a low level of awareness relating to NISEP, those who took part in the focus groups expressed a lot of interest in what the scheme entailed, and a number confirmed that they would seek out more information about the scheme after taking part in the research.

Benefits and drawbacks of NISEP scheme participation

Whilst feedback was generally positive, a number of drawbacks to NISEP were considered by focus groups, which can be linked to a lack of awareness and understanding how the programme works. In particular, groups noted the following potential issues:

- The perception that installers may purposely raise the price when fitting an insulation/heating measure;
- The perception that scheme providers could require programme participants to use their service for a certain period of time; and

- The perception that NISEP managers might not use all of the funds that come from the energy efficiency levy towards NISEP schemes.

It should be noted that feedback from programme participants did not reflect these concerns:

- All participants spoke highly of the scheme they had experience of, describing their energy provider and service received with positive language.
- Whilst some experienced a wait time between application and installation that was longer than desired, most participants were generally understanding of this and felt the wait time to still be reasonable.

2. Introduction

Over the past number of years, there has been growing concern across the European Union (EU) in relation to energy resource scarcity and the effects this is having on climate change. As a result, in 2012 an EU Energy Efficiency Directive (EED) was formed, which has set energy saving targets for a number of EU countries¹. Northern Ireland has been focused on meeting these objectives, with NISEP, an energy efficiency scheme delivered by the Utility Regulator, delivering up to 200GWH per year of energy savings towards UK and EU targets. Fuel poverty is also a concern in NI, particularly after a 2011 investigation into housing conditions revealed that this region faces the highest level of fuel poverty in the UK. To address this issue, the Department for Communities delivers two main energy efficiency schemes:

- The Affordable Warmth Scheme, managed by the Department for Communities (DfC); and The Boiler Replacement Scheme, managed by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE).

Since then, fuel poverty levels have almost halved, moving from 42% in 2011 to 22%² in 2016. It had been recognised that NISEP is currently the only Northern Ireland policy measure contributing to the UK's overall energy saving targets as required by the 2012 EU EED. NISEP currently focuses the majority of support towards vulnerable customers.

Currently, a sum of money is collected from electricity customers to provide funding for NISEP's schemes. The purpose of NISEP is:

1. To achieve efficiency in the use of energy;
2. To ensure socially and environmentally sustainable long-term energy supplies; and
3. To accomplish the above objectives at best value to customers, whilst also having due regard to vulnerable customers.

Since 2013, NISEP has been rolled forward on an annual basis. In order to ensure continued support for energy efficiency measures, the UR has agreed to extend NISEP for a further year until March 2020, pending the outcome of a forthcoming review of the programme.

¹ Sourced from EUROPA, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1399375464230&uri=CELEX:32012L0027>

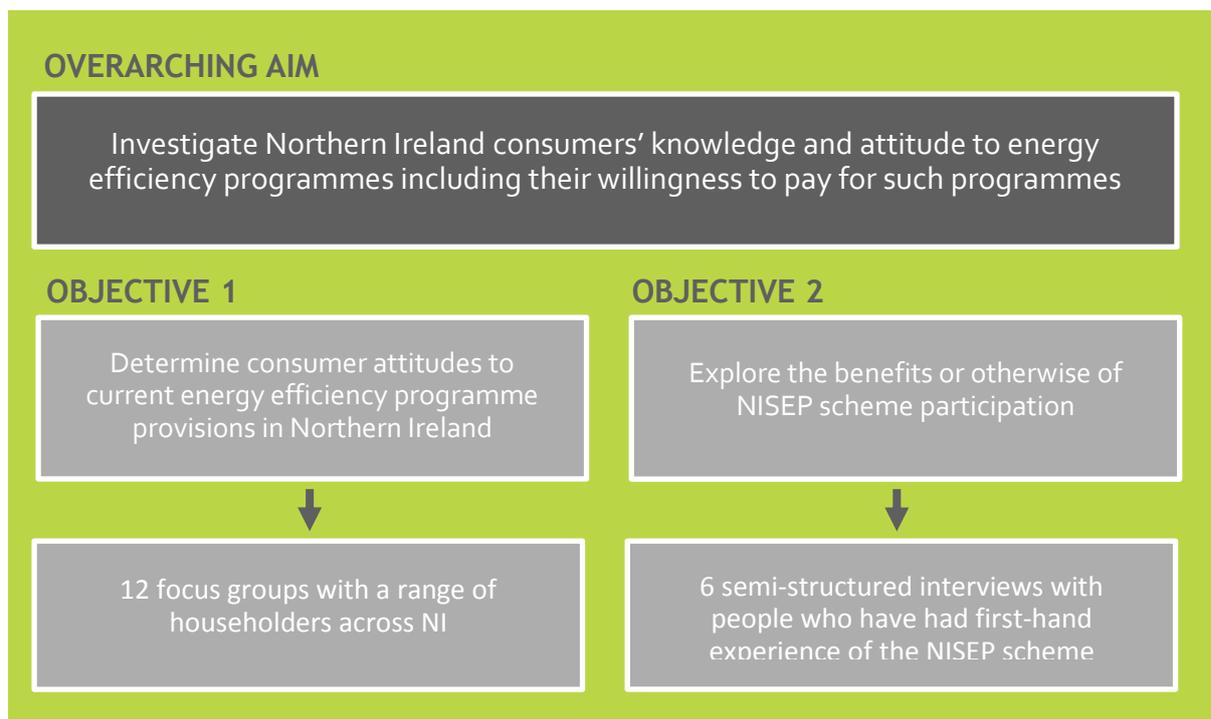
² Sourced from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, available at: https://www.nihe.gov.uk/house_condition_survey_main_report_2016.pdf

2.1 Research aims and objectives

The Consumer Council, in partnership with the UR and DfE, commissioned Perceptive Insight to undertake qualitative research directed at investigating consumers' knowledge and attitudes toward energy efficiency programmes in Northern Ireland, including their willingness to pay for such programmes. Findings from this research will be used by the Consumer Council, UR and DfE as part of their review into the current provision of energy efficiency support within Northern Ireland and future need for NISEP.

The project has involved two aspects, as outlined in Figure 2.1.1 below.

Figure 2.1.1 Summary of the project's aim, objectives and approach



In order to fully meet Objective 1, Perceptive Insight hosted 12 focus groups with a range of householders across Northern Ireland. Measures were taken to ensure a representation by key demographics, and that no particular demographic cohort was over or under-represented. In addition, and in order to fulfil the requirements of Objective 2, Perceptive Insight carried out six semi-structured interviews with people who have had first-hand experience of a NISEP scheme. Section 3 provides further detail on the methodological approach used to fulfil Objectives 1 and 2 of this research project.

3. Methodology

Table 3.1 provides a summary of the key stages that have been involved in carrying out this research. In the paragraphs that follow, we provide further detail on our approach for meeting the Consumer Council’s research objectives.

Table 3.1 Summary of methodology

PLANNING & DESIGN	
Planning meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discuss scope of research - Agree timetable - Agree reporting arrangements
Group structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Design and agree criteria for focus groups - Design recruitment questionnaire - Source and recruit participants
Topic guide design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Design draft topic guides - Agree final topic guide: Focus groups - Agree final topic guide: Semi-structured interviews
IMPLEMENTATION	
Focus group moderation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Book venues and co-ordinate dates - Conduct focus groups discussions
Semi-structured interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Book meeting places and co-ordinate dates - Conduct face-to-face interviews
ANALYSIS & REPORTING	
Analysing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Undertake thematic qualitative analysis - Source supporting quotations
Reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Prepare draft report - Submit final report

3.1 Focus groups

In order to investigate consumer attitudes toward energy efficiency provisions, Perceptive Insight hosted 12 focus groups with a range of Northern Ireland householders. A total of 96 participants took part in our focus group sessions, which ran from 17 September to 9 October 2018. Recruitment of participants to the groups was undertaken by our team of experienced recruiters using a screening questionnaire. This questionnaire was designed to match participants against a series of selection criteria that was agreed in conjunction with the Consumer Council Project Team.

Within the group structure, we aimed to recruit a range of participants based on differences in location, age, socio-economic group, rural/urban spread, and tenure. A number of key trends

relating to household composition within Northern Ireland were also considered. Table 3.1.1 details the structure of each group that was interviewed.

Table 3.1.1 Group structure

Type	Age	SEG	Location	Home ownership	Other criteria
Top earning home owners	35+	AB	Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council	Homeowner	Earns over £40,000 (couple) or £30,000 (single) per year
Young private renters	Under 35	Mixed	Causeway coast and Glens Borough Council	Private renter	-
Young home owners	Under 35	Mixed	Newry, Mourne and Down District Council	Homeowner	Lives alone/as couple
Retired homeowners	60+	-	Ards and North Down Borough Council	Homeowner	Lives alone/as couple
Disability households	Mixed	Mixed	Belfast City Council	Mixed	Has a household member with a disability that limits their day to day activities
Lone parents	Mixed	C2DE	Derry City and Strabane District Council	Private renter	Lone parent who earns less than £40,000 per year
Households with dependent children	Mixed	Mixed	Belfast City Council	Homeowner	Have children who are between 0-18 years old
Households with non-dependent children	Mixed	Mixed	Mid Ulster District Council	Homeowner	Have children who are 18+ years old
Gas & housing association tenants	35+	Mixed	Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council	Social housing	Has gas heating
Oil heating households	35+	Mixed	Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council	Homeowner	Has oil heating
Rural households	35+	Mixed	Fermanagh and Omagh District Council	Mixed	Lives in an area with less than 2,500 residents
Low income households	35+	C2DE	Mid and East Antrim Borough Council	Mixed	Earns less than £30,000 (couple) or £23,000 (single) per year

To assess attitude and sentiment towards “energy efficiency” and the various schemes on offer across Northern Ireland, a topic guide was designed which was used to direct focus

group discussion. The topic guide reflected the terms of reference for the project. A copy has been enclosed at Appendix A: Focus group topic guide.

3.2 Semi-structured interviews

Perceptive Insight also conducted six semi-structured interviews with people who have had first-hand experience with a NISEP scheme. The purpose of these interviews was to ascertain the perceived benefits or otherwise of scheme participation.

The Energy Saving Trust (EST) supplied Perceptive Insight with a list of 14 appropriate individuals to participate in these depth interviews. We selected a mix of people from the list provided and made contact to see if they would like to take part in the research. Where possible, measures were taken to ensure a variety of respondents were interviewed, so that no particular demographic was over or under-represented.³

In order to improve response rates, Perceptive Insight supplied a £10 shopping voucher incentive to those who successfully completed an interview. Table 3.2.1 provides a breakdown of the interviews achieved, and includes key demographic information relating to the respondents.

Table 3.2.1 Semi-structured interviews achieved

Scheme name	Measures installed	Location	Gender	Other
Thermal comfort	Loft insulation	Enniskillen	Male	Retired
Keep warm	Cavity wall and loft insulation	Derry~Londonderry	Female	-
Keep warm	Cavity wall and loft insulation	Newtownabbey	Male	-
Energy plus	Heating system	Dundonald	Couple	Retired
Keep warm	Cavity wall and loft insulation + energy saving light bulbs	Newtownabbey	Male	Lives in an older home
Energy plus	Heating system and loft insulation	Gilford	Couple	Retired

Moderation of the interviews undertaken by our qualitative researchers who have extensive experience in conducting these interviews and engaging with a range of stakeholders. A topic guide was used to guide discussions, and is enclosed at Appendix C: Semi-structured interview topic guide.

Perceptive Insight adopted a flexible approach to this component of the research, holding interviews either face-to-face or via telephone (pending on the needs/wishes of individual

³ Based on a small sample frame and low response rates, we were able to interview a minimum of one NISEP participant per primary bidder.

participants). Each interview lasted up to one hour, and included topics that investigated how respondents first heard of NISEP, their overall perceptions of the programme, perceived benefits and/or drawbacks associated with programme participation, and opinions on how NISEP could be improved.

3.3 Analysis and reporting

Responses from both the focus groups and semi-structured interviews were analysed using a thematic coding approach, in line with the Consumer Council's requirements. This involved taking notes from an audio-recording of each focus group/interview, and identifying key findings, themes, and quotes. We also looked at differences in response across each of the focus groups, considering themes by location, socio-economic profile, and/or age. In order to protect the privacy of participants, all research findings that are presented in this report have been anonymised.

Summary observations for each focus group have been attached at Appendix B: Focus group summaries.

4. Findings: Focus groups

This section of the report provides a summary of key findings from the 12 focus group discussions undertaken in order to meet Objective 1 of this research project. Feedback is structured under the following headings:

- **Attitudes to and perceptions of energy efficiency;**
 - Energy saving behaviour and measures taken;
 - Response to Northern Ireland’s fuel poverty statistics;
- **Awareness and understanding of energy efficiency programmes in Northern Ireland;**
- **Opinions of energy efficiency programmes in Northern Ireland; and**
 - Benefits of energy efficiency programmes;
 - Drawbacks of energy efficiency programmes;
- **The NISEP funding model;**
 - Views on NISEP’s funding model;
 - Opinions about who should receive funding.

Summary boxes have been included to illustrate instances where responses differed by key demographic group.

4.1 Attitude and perceptions of energy efficiency

Focus group sessions were designed to elicit insights about participants’ awareness and opinions of the various energy efficiency programmes currently operating across Northern Ireland. Based on the understanding that some may not be aware of these provisions and/or have different ideas about what “energy efficiency” is, time was spent in each session exploring this concept.

At the start of each group, participants were asked about their perceptions relating to energy efficiency. This involved an exercise whereby groups described characteristics that they associate with an energy efficient and energy inefficient household. Table 4.1.1 provides a breakdown of these responses. Most participants described energy efficient households in a positive tone and in reference to certain structural features (e.g. cavity walls).

Table 4.1.1 Words selected by participants to describe an energy efficient and energy inefficient household

Most common words used to describe an energy <u>efficient</u> household	Most common words used to describe an energy <u>inefficient</u> household
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Insulation/Cavity wall insulation/Sensor lights/ LED lighting/ Thermostats/ ▪ Less expensive/Fuel efficient/Economical ▪ Modern/New ▪ Green/Eco-friendly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ No cavity/loft insulation/ Bad fitting doors and windows/ No heat system/Single glazing ▪ Wasteful/Lazy/Expensive ▪ Old/Old fashioned/Poorly built/Large ▪ Environmental cost

4.1.1 Energy saving behaviour and measures taken

Time was spent in each group discussing what, if anything, participants have done in their home to help save energy. Most participants explained that they engage in certain behaviours, including limiting the use of heat in their home (either by keeping their thermostat set to a low setting or only heating rooms that are in use), turning off lights that are not being used, using LED light bulbs, reducing the use of certain electrical appliances (e.g. tumble dryers) as much as is practical or possible, and ensuring that doors are closed off from draughts. A number of group participants also explained that they had made structural changes to their home, including:

- Boiler replacement and/or regular maintenance;
- Loft insulation;
- Cavity wall insulation;
- Double or triple glazing; and
- Gas installation to replace oil heating.

A small number of participants reported that they recently had solar panels installed, and one participant explained that he had installed a heat recovery system when he built his home.

Across all groups, most participants indicated that energy efficiency in the home is important to them for two reasons: to save money and/or to look after the environment.

Saving money

The desire to save money was listed by all groups as the primary reason participants have made structural changes to their home (including insulation, heat system maintenance and/or upgrades) and regularly engage in certain energy saving behaviours. A number of participants also linked energy saving behaviour to positive environmental effects. However, this was generally considered an additional benefit to conserving energy, rather than a primary motivator.

*“I can’t say I do these things to save the world as such. I do it to save money.”
(Rural participant)*

4.1.2 Response to Northern Ireland’s fuel poverty statistics

Whilst most participants considered energy efficiency to be an issue for Northern Ireland, few had heard of the term “fuel poverty”. We provided a definition of the term, noting recent statistics indicate that 22% of Northern Ireland households are said to be affected. A number of participants were surprised by this figure, explaining that they thought the percentage would have been higher.

*“I would say we all spend at least 10% on our income on energy costs.”
(Lone parent)*

*“I would classify myself as being in fuel poverty.”
(Lone parent)*

“I would say it’s very high because Northern Ireland is one of the worst paid areas of the UK and oil prices are quite high.”

(Oil household)

“I think that’s wrong. I would love to know where that figure [22%] came from.”

(Housing association tenant)

“I think it might be a lot higher because a lot of people may be ashamed to say that they don’t have enough money to heat their house. I’ve actually been like that myself at one stage.”

(Disability household)

4.2 Awareness and understanding of energy efficiency programmes in Northern Ireland

Respondents were asked to relay their knowledge of any energy efficiency programmes currently operating in Northern Ireland. In general, there was a low level of awareness and understanding relating to the different provisions on offer. During group discussions, participants provided a vague response to probing questions, including “do you know of any energy efficiency programmes that operate in Northern Ireland?” Most groups reflected questions back onto the moderator, demonstrating a limited understanding of what schemes are available and/or how they work.

Solar panels was a thing a while ago, wasn't it?
(Oil household)

Is there one for replacing windows, or no?
(Young home owner)

“Do some of those not stop?”
(Household with dependent children)

SUB GROUP COMPARISONS: RETIRED, LOW INCOME, HOUSING ASSOCIATION AND DISABILITY HOUSEHOLDS

Compared to others interviewed, participants in the retired household group were more likely to be aware of Northern Ireland’s various energy efficiency schemes. Whilst the retired group was not able to recall the names of all schemes, participants were familiar with various programmes in place, particularly the Boiler Replacement Scheme. In addition, more than half of the participants in this group said that they had availed of an energy efficiency programme in the past (which provided them with a roof/loft insulation, cavity wall insulation, and/or boiler).

“If you change your boiler, you get a grant for that if the boiler is 15 years or older, and that’s when the cavity wall insulation kicks in with the Housing Executive. Once you change your boiler, then you get your cavity wall insulation.”
(Retired participant)

“If you change from oil to gas, you get a grant for that as well.”
(Retired participant)

“We got a new boiler, cavity insulation, hot water jacket and insulation in the roof space.”
(Retired participant)

A number of participants in the low income, housing association and disability groups also indicated that they had heard of or availed of a scheme, however were not as familiar with the programmes. In general, participants in these groups were unable to recall the names of energy efficiency programmes or schemes until prompted.

4.3 Opinion of energy efficiency programmes in Northern Ireland

Following from an initial discussion designed to gauge unprompted awareness of energy efficiency schemes, participants were briefed on three energy efficiency programmes that currently service the Northern Ireland area, including the Affordable Warmth Scheme, Boiler Replacement Scheme, and a variety of NISEP schemes on offer⁴. Based on this information, each group was asked to provide their opinions for each programme. Particular attention was paid to participants' opinions of NISEP.

Whilst providing this information helped a small number to remember hearing about certain schemes, most participants were still of the view that they had not heard of energy efficiency programmes in the past. For the few who were able to recall a scheme after being prompted, the most recognised was the Boiler Replacement Scheme.

It should also be noted that a large number of participants expressed interest in seeking out further information about NISEP and its associated schemes based on what they learnt having attended the focus group.

4.3.1 Benefits of energy efficiency programmes

In general, focus group participants held positive views toward Northern Ireland's various energy efficiency schemes. It was considered that these programmes are likely to be having a positive impact on the rate of fuel poverty across Northern Ireland.

Helping households most in need

Groups expressed the view that energy efficiency programmes including the likes of NISEP, the Affordable Warmth Scheme and the Boiler Replacement Scheme are important as they are likely having a positive impact for the well-being of certain groups. It was also considered that improving energy efficiency in the homes of some would have a multiplier effect on the rest of the economy (e.g. less illness would improve access to health care for others and reduce tax money spent).

*"It's good to hear that there is something for the really poor person that does have nothing."
(Rural household)*

*"If it's going to improve the efficiency of a house that's behind the times then it can only be a good thing."
(Top earning home owner)*

*"Their principle is right. They're taking inefficient heating, and they are bringing it up to a modern standard."
(Retired household)*

⁴ In order to provide focus groups with a broad overview of the different NISEP provisions on offer, four schemes were explained to participants. These included: Energy Plus (a whole house solution that is fully funded), Energy Saver Homes (a whole house solution that is partly funded), Home Comfort (a whole house solution that is partly funded) and the £250 insulation grant (an individual measure that is partly funded).

*“If more people feel warm, there’s less illness and less money on tax care in terms of the NHS.”
(Oil household)*

4.3.2 Drawbacks of energy efficiency programmes

Whilst focus group participants were generally of the view that energy efficiency schemes have a positive impact for Northern Ireland, a number of drawbacks were considered. These extend to a limited understanding and awareness of energy efficiency schemes operating in Northern Ireland, the perception that applying to a scheme would be difficult, and the view that eligibility criteria for the Affordable Warmth Scheme, Boiler Replacement Scheme and NISEP are limiting the number of people who are able to benefit from the programme. A level of scepticism toward NISEP managers and scheme providers was also expressed in group discussions.

Low awareness

Very few participants were familiar with the NISEP name and/or its various schemes. All groups were in agreement that low levels of awareness and understanding is likely to be having a negative impact on the effectiveness of NISEP, as not all households who may benefit would apply to and avail of the programme.

*“It sounds like they [NISEP] are doing a great job but this is the first time I’m hearing of it.”
(Young private renter)*

*“If we’re all using the electricity why is it not advertised via your provider, [for example] ‘we’re charging you this but you could avail of such and such.’”
(Top earning home owner)*

*“They should put it out there. You’re telling us things around this table that we didn’t even know about. Why is this not advertised?”
(Rural household)*

Groups listed a number of channels which they consider to be effective platforms on which to advertise NISEP on. These included:

- Television;
- Radio stations;
- Billboards;
- Newspapers;
- Social media (e.g. using Facebook for targeted advertising); and in
- Letters addressed to the household.

SUB GROUP COMPARISONS: RURAL HOUSEHOLDS

Compared to other groups, rural households were more likely to suggest advertising via local channels, including local newspapers and community workers/groups.

A small number of participants also suggested simplifying the NISEP programme by avoiding the use of multiple providers and/or scheme names.

“It would be less confusing if all of the companies worked under the one brand name.”
(Young private renter)

Lengthy application processes

A number of focus group participants expressed the view that applying to the Affordable Warmth Scheme, Boiler Replacement Scheme and/or NISEP is or would be a difficult and lengthy process. This belief was generally based on participants’ personal experience of applying to a government initiative, or from hearing stories about applying through others. In some cases, participants who had considered applying for an energy efficiency scheme decided not to, based on the perception that it would be a cumbersome process and/or involve “red tape”.

Boiler Replacement Scheme – “The paperwork, the hoops you had to jump through, the crap you had to go through... then to verify that your boiler was old enough, and you had to get a certain amount of quotes from different people... building control and all that. There’s just so much.”
(Low income household)

“Is that not always in the back of your mind, the perception that no matter what they’re offering, by the time you go through the red tape they rule you out? So you never bother to look at any of those because you’ll never get them.”
(Rural participant)

“The fact is, you could fill out form after form, and still not qualify for anything.”
(Retired household)

“If your heating was broken by the time you’ve applied for a grant it would be weeks before anyone could fit it... it’s too long to wait especially coming in to winter.”
(Young private renters)

“I think it’s a lot of running about, a lot of phoning and a lot of hassle, so [when I heard about it] I just didn’t bother.”
(Household with non-dependent children)

Stringent eligibility criteria

All groups considered that Northern Ireland’s energy efficiency programmes could be improved if the eligibility criteria for programme participation is broadened. Whilst a number of participants were of the view that NISEP’s income criteria provides greater flexibility than that of the Affordable Warmth Scheme, it was considered that NISEP’s income cut-offs could be extended further, and that not many households are likely to have “no heating” or “broken beyond repair heating”.

“I find that it’s great for me now because I’m in that situation. This is the only time I’ve ever been unemployed and found myself separated, so that’s why I can get it. Whereas when I was working, it was like I was penalised for working. That’s not really fair.”
(Lone parent)

*On the Affordable Warmth Scheme - "I think at £20,000 per income per house, I can imagine it rules quite a few people out."
(Rural household)*

*On NISEP schemes - "Every single scheme is for someone who doesn't work. So if you work, you're getting punished."
(Young home owner)*

*On NISEP schemes - "We don't fall into those [income] criteria but with the expenditures we have it takes us well below, but nobody factors any of this."
(Low income household)*

*On NISEP - "There's a lot of loopholes in terms of wages and whoever is in the household. I mean, there's not much of a mark-up in terms for couples."
(Oil household)*

*On NISEP - "They make them sound good but when you think about it, who doesn't have heating?"
(Low income household)*

A number of participants expressed the view that households on low incomes are unlikely to be able to pay the remainder of the cost towards an energy efficient scheme that is not fully funded. It was suggested that in these instances, it may be desirable to provide a low interest loan option to participants.

*"I do think [involving] Credit Unions would be a good idea. So say you're a member of the Credit Union and you want a boiler and there's a £1,500 cost, you [should be able to] bring your receipt to them and the Credit Union pays the provider...then you just pay it back [to the Credit Union] at low interest or something."
(Household with non-dependent children)*

SUB GROUP COMPARISONS: HOUSING ASSOCIATION TENANTS

Those in the housing association group were of the opinion that the Affordable Warmth Scheme, Boiler Replacement Scheme and NISEP schemes "discriminated against" tenants in social housing. It was considered by the group that these programmes are largely directed at private sector households. Housing association participants were provided further information about a number of NISEP schemes designed specifically for housing association tenants, including the Cosy Homes, Cosy Homes Insulation and Housing Association Energy Saver schemes. Participants felt these schemes were also "unfair" to the extent that they are not fully funded, unlike other NISEP schemes that are available to home owners and private renters.

*On NISEP schemes – "It's only suitable for some people. So at the end of the day unless you fall into that criteria you can't avail of it, so it's no good."
(Housing association tenant)*

*On Boiler Replacement Scheme – "I think that's NIHE tenants discriminated against again for energy efficiency in Northern Ireland. Everybody is paying their rent. If you pay your rent you should be able to apply."
(Housing association tenant)*

Perception that scheme providers are making a profit

Participants were provided with information about NISEP's achievements to date. This included detail on the programme's expenditure, number of home installations, and customer savings ensued from the programme's spend. NISEP's core aims and objectives were also discussed.

A level of scepticism was expressed by participants from each of the groups. It was considered that programme managers, scheme operators, and/or installation companies may be focused on generating a profit through NISEP schemes, rather than meeting the needs of applicants.

"A neighbour of mine got a quote for a new boiler and because she mentioned getting the £1000 the price went up... when she rang my brother it was only worth £1400 but they were charging her £2500."

(Top earning home owner)

"They [scheme managers] are going for the headline that 'oh you can get all this here', but a minimum amount of people can actually meet the criteria."

(Low income household)

"It's probably just because the energy companies want to have good PR, saying that they are tackling fuel poverty, but if you get into the nuts and bolts of it, they don't seem to be doing much."

(Household with non-dependent children)

"The likes of <gas supplier> and that, they're obviously going to tell you about the schemes, because they want to make money. Then they'll just stick their arm in even more."

(Young home owner)

"I know a few years ago somebody that applied for the [Boiler Replacement Scheme] and because it was an old boiler, whenever he applied for this grant inspectors came out and there had to be some kind of a whole system put in. He was out a lot of money, and it cost him as much as he saved. He ended up having to do a whole lot of work because there were new measures in place that weren't in place whenever he got the original boiler. He said if he had of known he wouldn't have done it. There's a whole lot of expense that you don't see at the beginning."

(Rural participant)

"They're [scheme providers] just going to get richer and richer, and they'll maybe con you into the idea that if you sign up for this, stick with us. Maybe there's a contractual thing there. Maybe you have to stick with them for so long. Then, that £1000 pound that they've given you, you'll give that back again."

(Household with dependent children)

"You get nothing for nothing. It's too good to be true."

(Rural household)

"Someone else is obviously benefiting at the other end."

(Oil household)

*“If it’s a genuine saving on the cost of insulation, then it’s a good scheme, but the question remains: Is it a genuine scheme, and how is it managed?”
(Top earning home owner)*

SUB GROUP COMPARISONS: YOUNG PRIVATE RENTERS, HOUSING ASSOCIATION TENANTS AND DISABILITY HOUSEHOLDS

Participants who identified as young private renters and/or social housing tenants were less likely than home owners to consider applying for NISEP schemes that are not fully funded. These groups explained that they see their rental as a short-term living solution, and considered structural changes to be more of a concern for their landlord.

*“Unless you own the house you’re not going to put your own money into it.”
(Young private renter)*

*“It wouldn’t really be down to us, if our heating broke we wouldn’t immediately think of those schemes, we would think the landlord sorts it out.”
(Young private renter)*

*“If you don’t own your property, why would you put money into someone else’s property?”
(Housing association tenant)*

*“It’s their houses, they should be funding the whole lot.”
(Housing association tenant)*

This was also raised in discussion by a member of the disability group who rented privately and has Economy 7 heating in their home. She explained that she had previously hoped to change to gas, however the landlord threatened to increase her rent. Based on this example, it was considered by the group that NISEP schemes would ultimately cost private tenants money whilst providing benefit to landlords.

*“I have three bedrooms and not even a radiator in one of them. There’s not even a radiator in the kitchen. There’s an electric radiator in the bathroom. The landlord said to me ‘we’re not putting gas in your house, unless we put your rent up’, and I says ‘well I’m not paying it.’”
(Economy 7 participant, disability household)*

*“If its private rented you’d expect your landlord to pay for your heating system.”
(Disability household)*

4.4 The NISEP funding model

Focus group participants were unaware of how energy efficiency programmes, including NISEP, are paid for. It was considered by most that the schemes are government funded. Participants were then informed that electricity users pay for NISEP via a mandatory levy, the amount of which depends on each household's electricity usage. For illustrative purposes, we revealed an approximate figure to focus groups, explaining that the "average household" pays £3.40 per year toward NISEP.

4.4.1 Views on NISEP's funding model

Focus group participants were asked to provide their opinion on the energy efficiency levy that they pay, and consider the equity of NISEP's current funding model.

Should be better informed

Most participants expressed the view that electricity users need to be better informed about the amount that they are paying towards NISEP.

*"If they weren't so sneaky about it, and said that it was £3.40 [that we are paying] from the start, that would have been fine."
(Rural household)*

*"I think they shouldn't be taking it without telling us."
(Top earning home owner)*

A fair amount

Groups generally considered £3.40 to be a low and fair amount, however a number indicated that they would be willing to pay more, provided they were personally able to avail of the NISEP schemes. Participants explained that this would require providing more flexibility to application criteria accompanying most of the NISEP schemes.

*"If it's coming out and it's costing [less than] a pound a month, you're not going to notice it."
(Oil household)*

*"I think it's a good system. It's only three quid a year and nobody is going to miss it."
(Oil household).*

*"I would [be willing to pay more] if it was going to the right people."
(Top earning home owner)*

*"If it's helping someone on a lower income I wouldn't mind more being taken off the bill to help fund it if it's helping someone less fortunate."
(Young private renter)*

*"If it was available to everyone, then I would personally be okay with it. It would be like paying taxes."
(Housing association tenant)*

SUB GROUP COMPARISONS: YOUNG HOME OWNERS

Young home owners were more likely than other groups to express a less than positive view towards NISEP’s funding model. Unlike participants from other groups, young home owners did not consider £3.40 to be a fair amount to pay.

*“[£3.40] is low, but it’s still our money.”
(Young home owner)*

*“I’d prefer to be giving it to a charity that is genuinely just giving out stuff.”
(Young home owner)*

*“If we’re all contributing, why should it be that its means tested?”
(Young home owner)*

4.4.2 Opinions about who should receive funding

Each group was asked to complete a “poker chip” activity, which involved participants imagining that they were responsible for allocating a hypothetical NISEP budget (represented by 20 poker chips). The purpose of this activity was to encourage focus group participants to consider what kinds of groups, if any, should receive priority for energy efficiency schemes in Northern Ireland. A “funding board” was presented to the groups which included a number of different categories, as represented in Figure 4.4.2.

Figure 4.4.2 Funding board presented to groups



All households	Low income households
Families with 1+ children	Single parent households with dependent children
Households with elderly people	Young singles/couples with no dependent children
Households with a disability	Other

All households, with priority given to vulnerable households

Most groups felt that all households should be able to avail of NISEP schemes, but in addition certain vulnerable groups should receive priority.

*“If everybody is paying £3.40 a year, then [they should] change the criteria.”
(Low income household)*

*“I think everybody should be eligible, ‘cause I think those who can afford it would do it themselves anyway.”
(Oil household)*

*“I think all households deserve something because when you work, you get nothing for free.”
(Top earning home owner)*

*“Everybody should have a chance, in the big picture things are going to improve for the whole place and not just little pockets here and there.”
(Top earning home owner)*

*“If it’s helping someone on a lower income I wouldn’t mind more being taken off the bill to help fund it if it’s helping someone less fortunate.”
(Young private renter)*

*“There are big bands – if it was more like a percentage scheme, or a tiered approach – one household gets £1,500 toward that boiler, the other get £1,000... all or nothing, that’s what it seems to be at the moment.”
(Young home owner)*

It was considered that “vulnerable” groups extend to those who may identify as:

- Low income households;
- Disability households;
- Elderly households;
- Households that live in an “old” build; and
- Families with dependent children.

Participants, in general, found it difficult to allocate the budget across the various groups. However, key considerations in their decision making process included:

- Could the group avail of funding from elsewhere (e.g. disability households)?
- How much heat did the group need (e.g. were they at home all day)?
- Were they on a low income?

5. Findings: Semi-structured interviews

The paragraphs that follow provide a summary of findings from the six semi-structured interviews undertaken in order to meet Objective 2 of this research project. Key areas of discussion included:

- Awareness of NISEP and the application process;
- Perceived benefits and drawbacks associated with programme participation;
- The NISEP funding model; and
- Suggestions for improvement.

Comparisons of feedback given between participants have been made sparingly given the small sample frame for this phase of the research.

5.1 Awareness of NISEP and the application process

Participants were asked to provide details on the programme they availed of, including the scheme name, provider and what measures they received through the scheme. The individuals were also asked to talk through and provide feedback on the application process. Most participants explained that they had availed of the scheme within the last year, and were able to recall the energy provider who installed the energy efficiency measure/s, however almost all participants had not heard of the “Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme”.

Low awareness

Participants explained that they had first become aware of an energy efficiency scheme through word of mouth (e.g. friend, family member or energy provider). This led most to search online for further information. However, for one older couple, a boiler serviceman made an initial enquiry on their behalf).

It was considered by those who took part in our interviews that that energy efficiency schemes in Northern Ireland are not widely known about.

The participants were asked if they had heard of the “Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme”, or “NISEP”. Feedback revealed that the participants were not familiar with the name, and were generally unaware that the scheme that they had availed of was connected to it.

“I just looked it up online and it was the only one that was available at the time for me.”

(Keep Warm customer, Newtownabbey, Male)

It was a friend of mine [that I heard about the scheme through]. She had just bought a place as well, and Citizen’s Advice had told her. There is actually a lot of grants like this. It’s just that they’re not advertised, but if you go on the website, they are right there if you just search for them.”

(Keep Warm customer, Newtownabbey, Male, Lives in an older home)

The application process

Participants were generally positive about the application process. In interview, it was explained by most participants that they made contact with a scheme manager following an online search, and were then provided documentation to fill out to ensure that all eligibility criteria had been met. Once the energy efficiency measure/s had been installed, building control came to inspect the work that had been carried out.

*“We just phoned and that was it from there... it was pretty easy and straightforward.”
(Keep warm customer, Derry~Londonderry, Female)*

*“You’re given a line to ring. You’ll either ring them and they’ll post you the application, or you can just print the same one online yourself and send it back, so I think that’s what we did. The application is pretty basic, the only thing you need to do is provide proof of your income, I think it’s P60’s and two pay slips. Something like that.”
(Keep warm customer, Newtownabbey, Male, Lives in an older home)*

Speed of service

Four of the six participants (one Thermal Comfort customer, one Energy Plus customer and two Keep Warm customers) felt that the application process took longer than desired. Participants were generally understanding about this. It was considered that the political situation (lack of Government in Northern Ireland) may have had an impact on response times, and/or that contractors may need to “build up” work in an area before calling out to their address.

*“It took about two or three months. At the time I wasn’t sure if we would hear from them for a couple of years because of the political situation here, but I can’t really attribute any of that to the scheme.”
(Keep Warm customer, Newtownabbey, Male, Lives in an older home)*

*““It took me six months [to get in touch with somebody about applying]. The phone would ring and ring, no answer...It took about two years in total. They wouldn’t come if there was just one house in the area, they needed two or three houses in the area to make it less painful for them...but they were very good now, I can’t complain about them at all.”
(Thermal Comfort customer, Enniskillen, Retired male)*

*“The waiting time [after applying] was quite long...probably like four or five months, because there are a number of companies in Northern Ireland who are doing the schemes...but you have to ring all the different companies, find out who has space to fit you, and see which one is the fastest.”
(Keep Warm customer, Newtownabbey, Male)*

*“It goes well, it’s just typical with anything like this, it’s very drawn out. It takes a long time. You know, for getting the windows done, we started that back in I think it was May or June, hoping that in the warmer weather they were going to do it they would come and do the windows but it looks like it’s going to be right in the middle of the cold...To me it’s a normal government department process. They’ve obviously got an awful lot of applications to consider, I think it’s just human nature that when you apply for something you want it done there and then... about two months was about the longest we waited, from the date of application to inspection etc. It wasn’t long really... with the workload they have.”
(Energy Plus customer, Gilford, Retired couple)*

5.2 Perceived benefits and drawbacks associated with programme participation

Those interviewed were asked to reflect upon any benefits and/or drawbacks they encountered based on their experiences of participating in a NISEP scheme. As part of this exercise, participants also reflected upon the standard of service they received.

5.2.1 Benefits associated with programme participation

Participants felt they had experienced a number of benefits having availed of a NISEP scheme. Benefits mentioned included a warmer home, positive financial impact and a good standard of service from workmen who carried out the installation/s in their home.

Warmer home

It was considered by participants that since having one or more energy efficiency measure/s installed in their home through a NISEP scheme, their house is noticeably warmer.

“The house heats up way warmer, and it keeps warmer longer, and obviously you save some money but I can’t tell you exactly how much I save because at the same time I switched from oil to gas, so it’s hard to tell.”

(Keep Warm customer, Newtownabbey, Male)

“We’ve noticed that the house is a lot warmer since then...It retains heat a lot better, even in the summer when we don’t have the heating on, the very top of the house is like a mini-green house.”

(Keep Warm customer, Newtownabbey, Male, Lives in an older home)

Positive financial impact

A number of participants also explained that they had experienced some financial benefit from participating in the programme (e.g. the value of their home has increased since having an energy efficiency measure/s installed), or that they would not have been able to afford the installation without the help of the scheme.

“As far as I know, the value of the house has actually gone up... it does increase your [home’s] value.”

(Keep Warm customer, Newtownabbey, Male, Lives in an older home)

“In general the price of electricity has gone up, so we haven’t noticed much difference, but I’m sure there will be in the long term.”

(Keep Warm customer, Derry~Londonderry, Female)

“I probably would not have insulated my home, if not for this scheme. There are probably more people who [also] wouldn’t [make these improvements] without the scheme.”

(Keep Warm customer, Newtownabbey, Male)

“When he [person who came to service boiler] said ‘you need a new boiler’, I thought, ‘Jesus, they’re about £2,000 or maybe £3,000, we don’t have that.’”

(Energy Plus customer, Dundonald, Retired couple)

“It’s a very good programme. I think it’s one we can all be grateful for, to get that sort of assistance, because we certainly couldn’t afford it. There’s just no way we could afford to do it... We’ve got a warmer home now, and it’s more economical to run because we are using about 60 litres of oil a week, which is quite expensive, so the more we can keep our heating costs down the better. Before [having the installations done] we would have put the heating on and off as needed, whereas now we leave the heating on, and it regulates through the day, which is [also] more comfortable.”

(Energy Plus customer, Gilford, Retired couple)

Standard of service

Participants explained that they received a good standard of service through the scheme. It was considered that the quality of the workmanship during installation was very good, and that the workmen were efficient, friendly and/or tidy.

“They were very pleasant, told us what they were doing, and it didn’t take them too long. They sort of explained everything as they went. They were quite friendly guys that did it. Didn’t cause too much interruption or anything.”

(Keep Warm customer, Derry~Londonderry, Female)

“Everything went smoothly, they did the insulation with no problems – quick and it’s working... they did the job more or less in two days. There were guys who came to do the walls one day, which was quite good and quick. Then there was another lot who did the roof space.”

(Keep Warm customer, Newtownabbey, Male)

“It was that good, I’ll actually say, the firm that put it in... you wouldn’t even have known they were here. They covered all the floor, all the stairs, and the toilet area, and they were in and out.”

(Energy Plus customer, Dundonald, Retired couple)

“The work was very good. They were actually very clean. They cleaned up after themselves, they hoovered and bought a hose with them as well.”

(Keep Warm customer, Newtownabbey, Male, Lives in an older home)

“It was a good team of guys that came in and did the job... It’s like a bomb goes off when they come in, ‘cause they are very quick. They were done in one day. They were here just after seven in the morning... and by three in the afternoon they were done, so it was very very quick.”

(Energy Plus customer, Gilford, Retired couple)

5.2.2 Drawbacks associated with programme participation

Most participants explained that they could not think of any negatives or drawbacks linked to participating in or availing of a NISEP scheme.

“The work was well done, and the heating has been better and all that, and Fusion who put it in... I would highly recommend it. So there’s no negatives, it’s all positives.”

(Energy Plus customer, Dundonald, Retired couple)

OTHER COMMENTS

One participant interviewed explained that while he was generally happy with the service he received, he was told he required a vent that was not necessary.

“We had an open fire, which at the time we weren’t using, but one of the [workmen] guys said that they had to put in a vent because it’s the law for carbon monoxide. So they drilled [a hole] the size of a brick through the wall. So if you’re sitting in the living room you now have a hole through the wall, but it’s a vent. Every bit of work they do is all tested so building control have to come out anyway to make sure everything is all fine...and the one thing they said was that they didn’t need to put one there. I think that’s more down to a specific contractor though, rather than anything to do with the scheme.”
(Keep warm customer, Newtownabbey, Male, Lives in an older home)

5.3 The NISEP funding model

Time was spent in each interview discussing the NISEP funding model. Participants were asked if they were aware of how NISEP is paid for, and encouraged to provide their views on the programme’s funding model.

Low awareness

None of the scheme participants were aware of how NISEP is funded. It was assumed by most that the programme is government funded, and/or linked to Stormont. Participants were then told that electricity users fund NISEP schemes, and that whilst the amount they pay depends on their electricity usage, the average household pays roughly £3.40 each year.

A fair amount

It was considered by most participants that £3.40 is a low and fair amount, and that they would be happy to continue paying this to help those who are less fortunate and may benefit from scheme participation.

“I think that’s alright... It’s funding a programme that does help people like us with getting in a boiler...It’s not much, is it?”

(Energy Plus customer, Dundonald, Retired couple)

“It seems ok. I mean, no one is going to miss that much money every year, and if it’s all going towards helping other people to improve, then that sounds good enough.”

(Keep Warm customer, Derry~Londonderry, Female)

“That’s nothing. It’s ok with me... You wouldn’t notice it in the space of a year, I mean £3.40 or even £10 or £15, that doesn’t matter, but I don’t know if they have enough money for the schemes or if it is abused. If you start giving away big money, there are people who will try to abuse it in different ways.”

(Keep Warm customer, Newtownabbey, male)

5.4 Suggestions for improvement

Participants were asked to reflect on any ways the scheme they were involved in, or NISEP more generally, could be improved.

Advertise and promote schemes

Most participants were of the view that NISEP, including the scheme they availed of, needs to be more heavily promoted and/or advertised to raise awareness.

Participants suggested a number of platforms through which to advertise NISEP, including leaflets, television, radio and newspapers.

“We’re pretty happy with it. No problems whatsoever. I just think maybe sometimes it should be advertised more. People should be more aware, older people, people that maybe can’t connect to internet and things like that.”

(Keep Warm customer, Derry~Londonderry, Female)

“The thing is, we never heard of them [NISEP schemes]. The boiler was only done through word of mouth...They don’t seem to advertise things enough...maybe a leaflet... they could advertise what there is if you qualify for it.”

(Energy Plus customer, Dundonald, Retired couple)

“We only found out about the scheme – it was very circumstantial – through word of mouth...maybe a bit more advertising...it could be made a bit more available...we get a lot of [leaflets] from the Council, which has a bunch of advertising and details about when to put out your bins. They could put something in there if it’s going to be coming through the door anyway.”

(Keep Warm customer, Newtownabbey, Male, Lives in an older home)

OTHER SUGGESTIONS

A number of other suggestions were considered by some, but not all programme participants who took part in interviews. These other suggestions involved speeding up the waiting time for service delivery, broadening the eligibility criteria, and consolidating NISEP into one scheme. Further detail on each of these recommendations is outlined below.

Speed up delivery

Two Keep Warm customers expressed the view that the waiting time between applying for their NISEP scheme and having installation work done was too long, and could be speeded up.

“If not for the waiting time I would say it’s very good, but because of the long waiting time, it’s just good... If you tell someone that they’re eligible, it should take two or three weeks, not two or three months. On top of that, they could tell you the date, they just said ‘we’ll give you a call back’... there was a problem with legislation here...so that could have affected it.”

(Keep Warm customer, Newtownabbey, Immigrated male)

Broaden eligibility criteria

One Energy Plus customer and one Keep Warm customer felt that eligibility criteria for NISEP programmes could be widened. The Keep Warm customer expressed the view that all houses over a certain age (“older”) should be able to avail of NISEP scheme, whilst one couple who availed of the Energy Plus scheme considered how strict income criteria thresholds may limit those who fall just outside the bands.

“I have mentioned to people that we did get it, family and that, but I think not everybody can get it, you know. If you have already got insulation in the house you can’t get any more... even if it is old. If somebody has an older house, maybe they could be [allowed] to apply for new insulation. After 20 years or whatever the [insulation] probably loses its value, the amount [of heat] that is kept in.”

(Keep warm customer, Derry~Londonderry, Female)

“I’ve heard of people getting a form to say ‘you’re entitled to this and that’, and when they actually put it in, they are returned the form which says ‘you’re over the income limit’, but he was only over it by £4. C’mon, you’re joking? That’s wrong. I suppose there has got to be a limit somewhere, but I think they should have a bit of [give], if you know what I mean?”

(Energy Plus customer, Dundonald, Retired couple)

Consolidate NISEP

One Keep Warm customer felt that NISEP schemes could be consolidated, so that one provider offers all services. It was considered that this would improve the programme’s efficiency.

“If someone would have called out to us and said ‘right, we’re here to assess your boiler as well as your walls as well as your windows’, if it had have been all done in the one go it might have been a bit easier for us. They would have had all the same details at the time, same income details, all of that.”

(Keep Warm customer, Newtownabbey, Male, Lives in an older home)

6. Concluding remarks

This section provides a series of concluding remarks and recommendations, based on our findings from focus group discussions and interviews with programme participants.

6.1 Limited levels of awareness and understanding

Discussions pointed toward low levels of awareness in relation to energy efficiency provisions offered across Northern Ireland, including NISEP. Most groups had no familiarity with *any* energy efficiency programmes or schemes that are available. This is despite a high level of expressed desire to save energy in the home – most participants said that they engage in energy saving behaviours and/or have had an installation made in their house to improve heat retention or efficiency.

For those who had heard of an energy saving scheme, levels of knowledge about it were limited (e.g. unable to recall the name of the provision or the scheme provider).

These findings were also reflected in feedback from NISEP programme participants, who explained that they had heard of an energy efficiency scheme by chance (i.e. through friends, family or otherwise). This led most to look online for further information.

Most programme participants were not familiar with the term “Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme”, and no participants interviewed were aware that the scheme they had applied to was connected to this programme.

It was considered by focus groups and programme participants that NISEP needs to be more widely advertised in order to promote awareness and understanding. As part of this communication process, there is a need to reduce confusion about what is on offer, and the role of suppliers.

A number of platforms were suggested by groups and participants which they felt would be effective advertising channels through which to promote NISEP. These included television, radio stations, billboards, newspaper, social media and lettered mail. Rural participants were more likely to recommend local channels (including community groups).

6.2 Confusion around NISEP processes

Feedback from the groups revealed a positive attitude toward NISEP, based on the understanding that the schemes are likely helping those most in need.

There was a lot of interest in what the scheme entailed. Indeed a number of participants confirmed that they would seek out more information about the scheme after taking part in the research.

However, a number of drawbacks to the programme were considered, which can be linked to a lack of awareness and understanding how NISEP works. For example:

- It was thought that the processes involved in applying for a scheme are likely to be lengthy, based on negative perceptions relating to prior experience of other government initiatives.
- It was considered by some that NISEP's multi-supplier framework and branding (which is divided into separate scheme names and managers) is unclear. A small number of participants reflected that the programme may be "less confusing" if branded/administered through one provider (rather than multiple scheme managers).

A certain amount of scepticism was also expressed across most focus groups. Some participants were of the perception that despite NISEP operating as non-for-profit, scheme providers and/or managers may be using the programme as a means through which to generate a profit. In particular, groups raised the following concerns:

- The perception that installers may purposely raise the price when fitting an insulation/heating measure;
- Scheme providers requiring programme participants to use their service for a certain period of time; and
- NISEP managers potentially not using all of the funds that come from the energy efficiency levy towards NISEP schemes.

It should be noted that feedback from programme participants did not reflect these concerns:

- All participants spoke highly of the scheme they had experience of, describing their energy provider and service received with positive language.
- Whilst some experienced a wait time between application and installation that was longer than desired, most participants were generally understanding of this and felt the wait time to still be reasonable.

6.3 The funding model

Focus groups and programme participants were not aware of the levy electricity users pay towards NISEP. As a result, it was considered by each of the groups that they could be better informed about the levy and what the money they contribute is used for.

Most groups and programme participants were of the opinion that the amount the average household pays toward NISEP per year (approximately £3.40) is low and fair.

In addition, a number of participants reflected that they would be willing to pay more if provided with information about the programme, and/or if certain eligibility criteria were reviewed. This is based on a belief that the application criteria as it stands may be restricting a number of vulnerable groups from availing of an energy efficiency scheme. This includes:

- Older homes who may have poor but not "broken beyond repair" heating; and

- Renters who are unlikely to finance or partly finance installation costs associated with their landlord's home.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These findings point to an increased need to review NISEP's branding and promotion. Taking the following steps may work towards increasing public levels of awareness and understanding, and addressing barriers related to confusion and scepticism towards NISEP schemes. Taking these actions may lead to an increased willingness to pay a higher amount through the electricity levy for funding purposes.

- ✓ Consider how the branding of the programme could be enhanced so as to have impact on those eligible and to reduce the confusion to potential applicants.
- ✓ Consider also how to promote the scheme more widely so that those who contribute to its funding are aware of the electricity levy and the impact it is having in Northern Ireland.
- ✓ Consider providing information and re-assurance in relation to the programme's application processes and the role of suppliers to the scheme (e.g. public relations activities). As part of these communications, it may be appropriate to emphasise that NISEP operates on a non-for-profit basis. Testimonials from customers may help to reduce scepticism toward NISEP and the processes involved.
- ✓ Consider reviewing eligibility criteria for a range of NISEP schemes that require "no heating" or "broken beyond repair" heating, which will allow families/individuals living in older homes to avail of a scheme before their heating system breaks.

Appendix A: Focus group topic guide

Warm up (5 mins)

Section overview: warm up exercise to give some background to the research, and to clarify their role as focus group participants and our role as researchers.

- **Introduce self and research aim** – to gather views on energy efficiencies programme provisions in NI
- **Explain how focus group discussions work** – no right or wrong answers etc.
- **Explain use of audio recorder/video**
- **Explain confidentiality and reporting procedures**
- **Ask each participant to introduce themselves** – name, family, type of system (oil, gas, electric) they use to heat their homes.

Attitude toward and perceptions of ‘energy efficiency’ (10 mins)

Section overview: to gain an understanding of respondents’ perceptions of what ‘energy efficiency’ is, their attitudes towards it, and any energy saving behaviour their household engages in.

- **Behaviour: Do you do anything to save energy in your home?**
 - Prompt: What? How often?
 - Prompt: Have you made any structural changes to save energy? (e.g. loft insulation, cavity wall insulation, and whole house solutions?)
 - Prompt: Have you sought out any energy advice before? (Online/contracted/organisation?) Why?
- **Rationale: What are the reasons why you do/don’t you do anything to save energy in your home?**
 - Prompt: What is the main reason?
- **Activity 1 – Word association/images**
 - What words and images would you use to describe a household that is energy efficient?
 - What words would you use to describe the average household (like yourselves)?
- **Beliefs: Is saving energy important to you?**
 - Prompt: Why/why not?
- **Beliefs: Is energy efficiency a problem for Northern Ireland in general?**
 - Prompt: Why/why not?
 - Prompt: Rate of fuel poverty in NI is 22% - a household is said to be in fuel poverty if it spends more than 10% of its income on energy costs.

Awareness and understanding of energy efficiency programmes in NI (15 mins)

Section overview: to uncover respondents’ awareness, knowledge and understanding of energy efficiency programmes that service NI.

- **Are you aware of any energy efficiency programmes that currently operate in Northern Ireland?**
 - Prompt: If so, what are they? (if necessary, list names of different programmes/schemes/organisations)
 - Prompt: Why do they exist? What services do they provide?
 - Prompt: Who are these programmes for? Describe the typical person who might be eligible to avail of these services?
 - Prompt: Who runs them?
 - Prompt: How are they funded?
 - Prompt: What else do you know about these programmes?
 - Prompt: Have you benefitted from any energy efficiency schemes? Why/Why not?
 - Prompt: What changes would you like to see made to the energy schemes currently on offer in NI?

Opinion of energy efficiency programmes, specifically NISEP (15 mins)

Section overview: to determine respondents attitudes towards current energy efficiency programme provisions in NI.

- **Explain what NISEP is, its core objective, the different schemes available, who delivers them and who is eligible.**
- **Are you aware of these programmes, now that I have described them?**
 - Prompt: If yes, have you/anyone you know used them?
 - Prompt: If yes, what is your view of them?
- **What benefits does this programme bring...?**
 - Prompt: For yourselves? Or for others using them?
 - Prompt: For low income households/those facing fuel poverty?
 - Prompt: For the greater public?
 - Prompt: For the environment?
 - Prompt: Any other benefits to running NISEP/any other energy efficiency programmes?
- **Can you think of any drawbacks of this programme or negative effects...?**
 - Prompt: For yourselves?
 - Prompt: For low income households/those facing fuel poverty?
 - Prompt: For the greater public?
 - Prompt: Are there any other drawbacks/negatives you can think of?
- **Do you think NISEP has done what it is supposed to? Why do you say that?**
 - Prompt: If so, how well?
 - Prompt: How could it be improved?
- **Overall, what do you think of NI's different energy efficiency programmes?**
 - Prompt: Are they a good idea or poor idea? Why/why not?
 - Prompt: Would you apply to these programme if you were eligible? Why/why not?
 - Prompt: Which programme do you like the most/least?

Paying for NISEP (15 mins)

Section overview: to determine respondents' attitudes towards how NISEP is funded, and explore alternative ways to fund the programme.

- **Explain how NISEP is funded** - all energy users pay for the NISEP scheme via a small amount on your electricity bill. The amount they pay depends on their energy usage.
-
- **How do you feel about the way NISEP is funded?**
 - Prompt: Does this change your overall opinion of NISEP?
 - Prompt: Is the funding model fair? Why/why not?
 - Prompt: Would you be happy to continue paying for NISEP in the current way you do?
 - Prompt: Is there a different way of funding the programme? What is it? What are the pros and cons of each suggestion?
- **What is your view on the groups that are eligible for NISEP?**
 - Prompt: Who should be eligible for fully funded/partially funded/cashback initiatives?
- **Activity 2 – What kinds of households should be prioritised for NISEP?**
 - Imagine you are in charge of allocating funding to different households for NISEP. You have been given a funding “budget” – please allocate your spend to different groups.
 - Prompt: which groups did give the most of your budget to? Why?
 - Prompt: which groups received the least? Why?

The importance of NISEP (15 mins)

Section overview: to determine respondents' perceptions about the importance of energy efficiency provisions in NI, and in particular NISEP's contribution towards tackling fuel poverty.

- **How important do you think it is to have energy efficiency programmes in Northern Ireland?**
 - Prompt: Why do you say this?
- **Do you think that these programmes make a meaningful difference?**
 - Prompt: To fuel poverty levels in NI? Why/why not?
 - Prompt: To increased quality of life? Why/why not?
 - Prompt: Compared to other schemes, do you consider NISEP to make a meaningful difference?
- **Do you think that NISEP is necessary?**
 - Prompt: Do you think other energy efficiency programmes are necessary?

Conclusions (10 mins)

Section overview: to wrap up the session and provide opportunities for further comments/ key messages.

- **How important is energy efficiency to you?**
- **Do you feel that you had a good understanding of the energy efficiency programmes that operate in NI before coming here today?**
- **Do you feel these type of programmes are necessary/of benefit?**
- **What do you think of these programmes and the way they are funded?**

- **What would you change about the NISEP scheme if you had the opportunity?**
- **What would you like to see from any future energy efficiency scheme and who should benefit?**
 - Prompt: Only fully funded? Only part fund, therefore results in more benefitting? Introduce loans?
- **Do you have any further comments you would like to make about energy efficiency programmes in NI?**

Thank and close

Appendix B: Focus group summaries

Group 10 - oil households

Included 8 participants from the Armagh city, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council. All participants were home owners aged 35+ with oil heating, mixed genders. Most were married/lived with their partner and children (some dependent/some non-dependent). Many were earning a C1 or C2 level income.

- **Attitude toward/perceptions of energy efficiency:** When asked if/how they save energy in their home, respondents explained that they tend to keep heating to a minimum and service their oil burner regularly (every 18 months). Many also explained that they would like to make further structural changes to their home to make it more energy efficient (and that this is a high priority for them), however the upfront cost of doing so is too expensive. Whilst there was agreement that energy efficiency is a problem in Northern Ireland, only 2/8 had heard of the term “fuel poverty”.

Words used to describe an energy <u>efficient</u> household	Words used to describe an energy <u>inefficient</u> household
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Insulated ▪ Upfront expensive ▪ Grade of efficiency ▪ Modern ▪ Warm ▪ Eco-friendly ▪ Green ▪ Less expensive (long-term savings) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Damp ▪ Costly ▪ Wasteful ▪ Hard to sell ▪ Old ▪ Environmental cost ▪ Careless ▪ Owners at home a lot

- **Awareness and understanding of energy efficiency programmes in NI:** There was a low level of awareness amongst the group in relation to the different energy efficiency programmes available. Participants were generally aware that some provision existed (e.g. a grant for certain boilers and schemes that are means tested), but were not able to provide further detail.
- **Opinions of energy efficiency programmes:** Once the different programmes were explained to them, participants commented that they were a good idea, although “badly advertised”. Facebook/social media were considered to be appropriate advertising platforms. Comments were also made in relation to application criteria – there was agreement that singles/couples on higher incomes (including themselves) should also be considered, as they do not have the savings to pay for energy home improvements. Extra income is usually prioritised for schooling/mortgage repayments/car loans.
- **Paying for NISEP:** Participants assumed that NISEP was likely to be government funded. It was then explained to participants that energy users pay for NISEP via a mandatory levy. Group participants considered £3.40 per year to be a fair and low amount, however mentioned that they would consider paying more if they were personally able to avail of

the NISEP schemes (i.e. the income criteria was broadened). A suggestion was made that energy users should be given the option to opt-out of the levy, based on the perception that only households with extremely low incomes are able to avail of the schemes. The group was of the opinion that all households should be given fairly equal opportunity to avail of energy efficiency schemes such as NISEP, reflected in their responses given to a “poker chip” activity they were asked to complete:

<p>All households</p> 	<p>Low income households</p> 
<p>Families with 1+ children</p> 	<p>Single parent households with dependent children</p> 
<p>Households with elderly people</p> 	<p>Young singles/couples with no dependent children</p> 
<p>Households with a disability</p> 	<p>Other</p>

- **The importance of energy efficiency schemes:** There was consensus that energy schemes are important, and that they increase the quality of life for programme recipients.

Group 4 - retired households

Included 8 participants from the Ards and North Down Borough Council area. All participants were home owners aged 60+, mix of oil/gas heating systems and gender, some lived on their own, others with a partner (two also had experiences looking after a household member with a disability).

- **Attitude toward/perceptions of energy efficiency:** The group was in agreement that saving energy is important to them because it helps to save money, is good for their health, and has a positive environmental impact. Almost all had loft/cavity wall insulation in their homes, and avoided using appliances where possible to save energy. There was agreement that energy efficiency is a problem in NI, particularly with younger generations.

Words used to describe an energy <u>efficient</u> household	Words used to describe an energy <u>inefficient</u> household
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Modern ▪ Solar panels ▪ Economical ▪ Insulated ▪ Air/ground pumps ▪ Combi-boiler ▪ Double glazed ▪ Separate heat and water ▪ Thermostats 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Condensation ▪ Draughty ▪ Old ▪ Expensive ▪ Cold ▪ No insulation

- **Awareness and understanding of energy efficiency programmes in NI:** Awareness of Northern Ireland’s different energy programmes was quite high. Whilst the group was not able to recall the names of all schemes, they had heard of various programmes in place, and were particularly familiar with the Boiler Replacement Scheme. 5/8 said that they had availed of an energy efficiency programme in the past (which provided them with a roof/loft insulation, cavity wall insulation, and/or boiler).
- **Opinions of energy efficiency programmes:** When asked to provide their opinion about the different schemes on offer, group participants were in agreement that the provisions on offer are “very good”. 7/8 believed that NISEP is a good idea. However, it was considered that the schemes are “not very well advertised”, and that television advertisements would help to promote awareness.
- **Paying for NISEP:** Before the funding model was explained to participants, participants expressed a belief that NISEP and other energy efficiency programmes are funded by the government. The group considered £3.40 to be a low cost, and were happy to pay this amount to help bring up the energy standard of all Northern Ireland households. When asked what kinds of households should be prioritised for these schemes, participants suggested that those with a disability, elderly people and/or families with children should be given precedence, as indicated by results from our “poker chip” activity:

<p>All households</p> 	<p>Low income households</p> 
<p>Families with 1+ children</p> 	<p>Single parent households with dependent children</p> 
<p>Households with elderly people</p> 	<p>Young singles/couples with no dependent children</p>
<p>Households with a disability</p> 	<p>Other</p>

- **The importance of energy efficiency schemes:** Focus group participants were in agreement that NISEP and other energy efficiency programmes are very necessary, but feel that these need to be better advertised in order to promote and achieve their objectives.

Group 7 - households with dependent children

Included 10 participants from the Belfast City Council area, all home owners with at least one dependent child living with them, mix of oil/gas heating systems, social class, age, and gender.

- **Attitude toward/perceptions of energy efficiency:** When asked if they do or have done anything to save energy in their home, the group mentioned that they often keep windows closed, keep appliances switched off, and have had insulation measures (e.g. double glazing, attic conversion) put into their home (about five or six years ago, or when they first bought their house). Participants from this group explained that saving energy was a concern for them in order to save money (primary concern) and to protect the environment (secondary concern). There was a mix in the group in terms of who was aware of the term “fuel poverty”. Once this was explained, group participants agreed that this is a problem in Northern Ireland, particularly for those living in older houses.

Words used to describe an energy <u>efficient</u> household	Words used to describe an energy <u>inefficient</u> household
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Warm ▪ Cosy ▪ Eco house ▪ Solar ▪ Double glazed ▪ Air tight ▪ Modern ▪ Wood burner/recyclable ▪ Foam insulation ▪ Money saving ▪ Cavity wall 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Damp ▪ Cold ▪ Draughty ▪ Mine ▪ Old fashioned ▪ Listed

- **Awareness and understanding of energy efficiency programmes in NI:** There was a low level of awareness and understanding among participants as to what schemes and programmes are available in Northern Ireland. Whilst some had heard of a Phoenix scheme of sorts, only 2/10 had heard of NISEP, The Affordable Warmth Scheme and/or The Boiler Replacement Scheme.
- **Opinions of energy efficiency programmes:** The various energy scheme provisions available across NI were then explained to participants, and the group was asked to provide their opinions. The group was in general agreement that the schemes available sounded good, but did not think they would be able to qualify. There was a level of scepticism expressed toward whether NISEP was truly not-for-profit. Comments were also made about the group’s limited knowledge of the programmes. It was considered that Northern Ireland’s energy efficiency provisions have not been well advertised.
- **Paying for NISEP:** The group was not sure how energy efficiency programmes are funded. It was then explained that all electricity users pay a small fee to fund NISEP

(approx. £3.40 per year). Participants mentioned that they don't mind paying this, and that it is such a small amount that it is not noticeable and/or does not impact them. The group also mentioned that they would be willing to pay more provided the way the programme is administered is "fair", and would need to be provided with more information about the schemes/if any profits are made by the operators before parting with more money. We then asked the group to complete our "poker chip" activity, considering which groups should be prioritised for NISEP. There was agreement that vulnerable groups (elderly people, low income households and families with children) should be given priority for energy efficiency schemes. Participants agreed that those with a disability were also a vulnerable group, but there was a perception that there is already a "huge amount of support" already available for these households:

<p style="text-align: center;">All households</p> 	<p style="text-align: center;">Low income households</p> 
<p style="text-align: center;">Families with 1+ children</p> 	<p style="text-align: center;">Single parent households with dependent children</p> 
<p style="text-align: center;">Households with elderly people</p> 	<p style="text-align: center;">Young singles/couples with no dependent children</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Households with a disability</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Other - "eco home builders"</p> 

- The importance of energy efficiency schemes:** Overall, participants from this group consider energy efficiency schemes to be important, and hold positive views in relation to NISEP (8/10 said they think this programme works well and is a good idea). It was explained by participants that energy efficiency schemes are likely to have a positive impact on the quality of life and the issue of fuel poverty in Northern Ireland. However, the group was in agreement that NISEP and other schemes need to be better advertised, and that word of mouth (hearing through friends/family) and social media would be the best channels to promote these programmes through.

Group 3 - young home owners

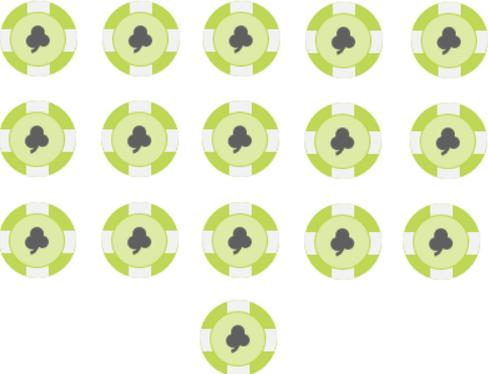
Included 8 participants, all home owners from the Newry, Mourne and Down District Council area who were under 35 years of age. Mix of oil/gas heating, social class and gender. Some participants had children, others lived with their partners.

- **Attitude toward/perceptions of energy efficiency:** Participants explained that they engage in certain behaviours in order to reduce energy usage – turning heating on only in rooms that are being used, switching off appliances and lights and keeping heating on a timer. In terms of structural changes made, one participant said they switched from oil to gas, and another had installed solar panels. Participants who had not made any structural changes explained a key reason was the cost involved, and limited understanding about how much money making a structural change would save in the long run. 7/8 participants said that they consider energy efficiency to be a problem in Northern Ireland, however most participants were unaware of the term “fuel poverty”.

Words used to describe an energy <u>efficient</u> household	Words used to describe an energy <u>inefficient</u> household
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ New build ▪ Good windows ▪ Investment ▪ Solar panels ▪ Green 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Poor insulation ▪ Draughty ▪ Costs a lot ▪ Old ▪ Single glazing

- **Awareness and understanding of energy efficiency programmes in NI:** The group had a low level of awareness and understanding of any of the energy efficiency programmes operating in Northern Ireland. Whilst one participant had heard of the Boiler Replacement Scheme, they were unsure of the specific details relating to this provision.
- **Opinions of energy efficiency programmes:** After being informed about the different schemes on offer, focus group participants expressed negative sentiment toward the Affordable Warmth and Boiler Replacement Schemes, based on the opinion that the eligibility criteria for these programmes limits the number who are able to benefit. They thought that NISEP was a good idea and provided a bit more flexibility (those on a slightly higher income are able to apply), but again expressed the view that the income thresholds for these schemes exclude a large number of households from availing. Participants in this group commented that they would not be eligible. It was explained to participants that NISEP is a non-for-profit scheme, however the group expressed a level of scepticism toward the programme, based on the understanding that private providers are involved in managing the schemes.
- **Paying for NISEP:** Participants were unsure about how NISEP is funded, and were surprised to learn that the programme is paid for via a mandatory electricity levy. The group felt the funding model for NISEP is “sneaky”, as they have not been made aware that they have been paying a levy to fund the programme. Upon consideration, the group suggested that they would be willing to pay up to £5 a year if they were personally able to

apply for the schemes (i.e. the selection criteria was broadened). Participants were then asked to complete the “poker chip” activity. The group gave the majority of their “funding money” (i.e. poker chips) to all households, based on agreement that all households should be able to apply for NISEP. A small amount was distributed to elderly households and young couples/singles with no children, as it was considered that these individuals would benefit most from additional support.

<p style="text-align: center;">All households</p> 	<p style="text-align: center;">Low income households</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Families with 1+ children</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Single parent households with dependent children</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Households with elderly people</p> 	<p style="text-align: center;">Young singles/couples with no dependent children</p> 
<p style="text-align: center;">Households with a disability</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Other - “eco home builders”</p>

“There are big bands – if it was more like a percentage scheme, or a tiered approach – one household gets £1,500 toward that boiler, the other get £1,000... all or nothing, that’s what it seems to be at the moment.”

- **The importance of energy efficiency schemes:** Participants acknowledged that Northern Ireland’s energy efficiency programmes do have a positive impact on the environment, and should continue to be offered, however the eligibility criteria should be

reconsidered. The group also strongly felt that NISEP needs to be better advertised. Participants suggested television as a primary channel for advertising NISEP, as a large number of households can be reached. The group also thought local radio stations and social media could be effective platforms for advertising.

Group 6 - lone parents

Included 7 participants from the Derry City and Strabane District Council area. All single parents earning under £40,000 per year with at least one dependent child living with them, mix of age, and gender. 6 participants were private renters, and 1 had recently moved from private renting to take on a mortgage. Most of the participants had oil heating.

- **Attitude toward/perceptions of energy efficiency:** Group members were in agreement that there is little they consciously do to save energy in their home, but would like to do more. Most group members were in agreement that saving energy was important to them, however one participant expressed the view that the worry and time it takes to consider saving energy is not worth the financial benefits ensued. In terms of structural changes, one participant had availed of a Firmus grant to change from oil to gas. Other participants commented on how they would like to switch from oil, however gas is currently only available in certain areas, and the outlay cost of switching may not be affordable.

“I could have the option of gas, but then it’s going through my landlord...and unless you get a grant, it’s expensive.”

- Group participants held the belief that energy efficiency is a problem for Northern Ireland, however none had heard of the term “fuel poverty”. Participants were surprised to hear that 22% of households in Northern Ireland are affected (there was a belief that this might be higher).

“I would say we all spend at least 10% on our income on energy costs.”

“I would classify myself as being in fuel poverty.”

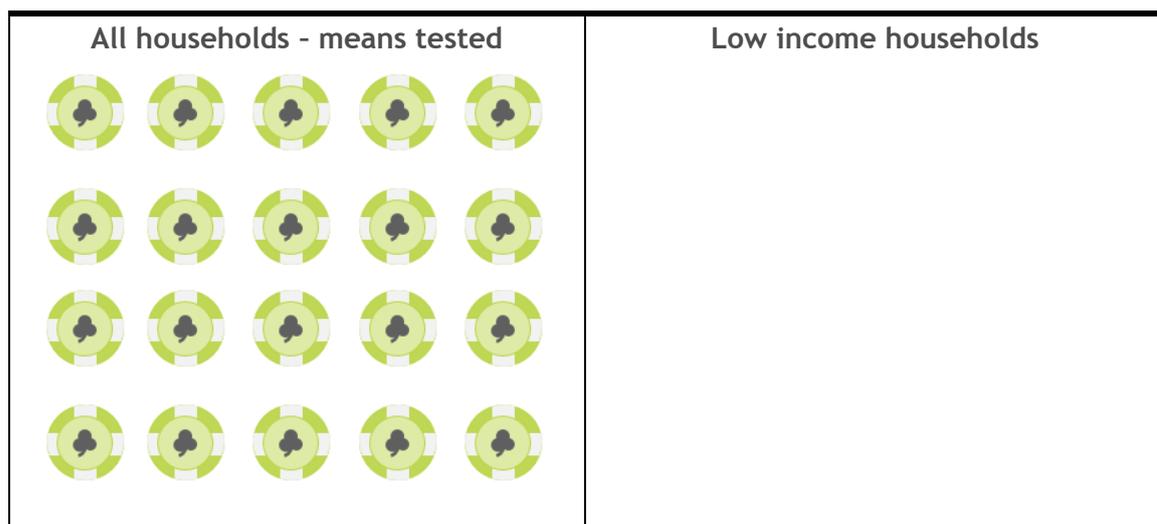
Words used to describe an energy <u>efficient</u> household	Words used to describe an energy <u>inefficient</u> household
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Low energy light bulbs/LED ▪ Switching off plugs ▪ People with lots of time ▪ Solar panels ▪ Insulated ▪ Motion sensor lights 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Uncaring – environment and finances ▪ Lonely ▪ Busy ▪ Old ▪ Skint/rich ▪ Lazy ▪ Happy

- **Awareness and understanding of energy efficiency programmes in NI:** Apart from one participant who had personally availed of a scheme, most of the group was not aware of energy efficiency provisions that operate in Northern Ireland. The names “NISEP/Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme” and “Affordable Warmth Scheme” were not recognised. However, after a prompt, a few group members recalled previously hearing of the “Boiler Replacement Scheme”.
- **Opinions of energy efficiency programmes:** After the group had been briefed about the different schemes on offer, participants provided their opinions. There was a belief that the different schemes were likely to be helping those most in need – those with no heating, unemployed and little money. A number of participants commented on the eligibility criteria however, expressing a concern that not all households are considered for the schemes:

“I find that it’s great for me now because I’m in that situation. This is the only time I’ve ever been unemployed and found myself separated, so that’s why I can get it. Whereas when I was working, it was like I was penalised for working. That’s not really fair.”

“If you’re on a low income you’ll get anything you want. It’s not fair.”

- **Paying for NISEP:** Participants were unaware of how NISEP is funded, and assumed that it is likely through a government budget of some kind. When it was explained that all electricity users pay for NISEP via a small levy, the group thought that this was a fair approach, and considered £3.40 to be a low and acceptable amount. Focus group participants then spent a considerable amount of time debating who should receive priority for NISEP funding. Whilst a number of participants held the belief that certain vulnerable groups should be prioritised (e.g. elderly/those with a disability), the majority ultimately agreed that all households should be considered for the NISEP schemes, with priority given based on a “means tested” approach.



Families with 1+ children	Single parent households with dependent children
Households with elderly people	Young singles/couples with no dependent children
Households with a disability	Other - “eco home builders”

- The importance of energy efficiency schemes:** All focus group participants felt NISEP was important. The group was in agreement that they had a low levels of awareness and understanding about these schemes, and expressed the belief that NISEP and others need to be better advertised. When asked which advertising platform would be best to reach them and others on, the group suggested television. The target audience for these advertisements was also considered. It was suggested that advertising should be directed to landlords (rather than tenants) in instances where the property is rented. One participant explained that she has received leaflets from energy companies in the past, but has discarded these on the basis that her landlord would have decision making power over energy matters:

“I get stuff through the door through Firmus, Power NI etcetera – but it’s junk mail to me. I don’t look at it.”

Group 1 - Top earning home owners

Included 8 participants from the Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council area, all homeowners aged 35+ and earning above £40,000 (as couple, or £30,000 as a single) per year. Mix of oil/gas heating system and gender.

- **Attitude toward/perceptions of energy efficiency:** The group listed a number of things they do around the home in order to save energy, including turning radiators off in rooms that are not being used, keeping doors and windows closed, and avoiding the use of certain appliances as much as possible (e.g. tumble dryers). A few participants had installed double glazing patio doors and used LED lightbulbs. When the group was asked if there are any further structural changes they would like to make, some participants explained that they would like to install solar panels or insulation in their roofing space to improve the warmth in their home. In the word association activity, focus group participants described energy efficient households with positive language. Negative associations were linked to houses that were not energy efficient, including “wasteful” and “silly”:

Words used to describe an energy <u>efficient</u> household	Words used to describe an energy <u>inefficient</u> household
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Modern ▪ New ▪ Sensible ▪ Green ▪ Cost efficient ▪ Triple glazed ▪ Warm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cold ▪ Draughty ▪ Expensive ▪ Wasteful ▪ Silly ▪ Hugging radiators ▪ Condensation ▪ Damp

- **Awareness and understanding of energy efficiency programmes in NI:** The group was aware of the Boiler Replacement Scheme, and a few participants had applied to other schemes that offered various insulation measures, however the group was not able to recall the name of these schemes or who they are managed by. There was agreement that the schemes available in Northern Ireland are vague and not easy to enquire about. One participant had tried to phone a provider after hearing an advert but was put through to different people and eventually gave up. Participants were then given a brief explanation of the different schemes currently operating within Northern Ireland. The group was not familiar with the Affordable Warmth Scheme or NISEP.
- **Opinions of energy efficiency programmes:** Participants expressed the view that the different energy efficiency schemes on offer in Northern Ireland are “good, if you know about them”. The group was in agreement that the schemes are not well advertised, although consider that NISEP is likely to improve the quality of homes, in addition to households’ general health and wellbeing. The group felt that some of the NISEP schemes were “unrealistic”, based on the view that the eligibility criteria narrows the pool of households that are able to apply. A level of scepticism was also expressed in

conversation, with some suggesting that there must be a “catch” - scheme managers may not be passing on all funding to programme participants.

- **Paying for NISEP:** Focus group participants guessed that NISEP is likely to be funded through taxation and/or local councils. Less than positive sentiment was expressed once it was explained to the group that all energy users pay for NISEP via a small fee. Participants felt that it should be communicated if all households are contributing to its operations. The group considered £3.40 to be a low amount that is not noticeable, but suggested that they would be prepared to pay a higher amount if assured that funding is going to the “right people”. When asked to consider who should be prioritised for NISEP by completing the “poker chip” activity, the group came to the agreement that whilst all households have a right to participate, vulnerable groups should be considered first (these include houses that are in a poor state of repair, rural houses that may not have access to gas, elderly residents and those with a disability or mental illness). Participants also raised the concern that it is important to make sure that tenants (rather than landlords) benefit from the scheme.

All households 	Low income households 
Families with 1+ children 	Single parent households with dependent children 
Households with elderly people 	Young singles/couples with no dependent children
Households with a disability 	Other - house location (rural/city), year and state of repair 

- **The importance of energy efficiency schemes:** Overall, this group was in agreement that provided NISEP offers a “genuine saving” for households, then it is a good programme. Participants held the belief that how the programme is currently managed and communicated/advertised should be re-considered. Participants suggested a number of

advertising channels for promoting NISEP, including television (as a primary channel), word of mouth, newspaper and radio promotion.

Group 2 - young private renters

Included 8 Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council participants with a mix of heating systems (one participant had Economy 7, one had gas heating, and the rest had oil heating in their home). Half of the group identified as “students”. All participants were private renters aged under 35.

- **Attitude toward/perceptions of energy efficiency:** All focus group participants explained that they are conscious of using heat sparingly and turning lights off in their home when they are not being used. Most participants were in agreement that saving energy is important to them. Students in the group reflected on a heightened awareness to save energy compared to when they lived at home, saying that they are much more careful now that they pay their own heating bill, compared to when they lived at home. No participants had made or had considered making any structural changes since moving in, however certain measures had been installed by their landlord (including double glazing and roof insulation). Participants were not sure about the age of their boilers. The group held the initial view that energy efficiency is not likely to be a problem in Northern Ireland. It was considered that the country has come a long way and many households now have double glazing and other in-built measures. When informed about fuel poverty levels however, participants felt this to be an issue.

Words used to describe an energy <u>efficient</u> household	Words used to describe an energy <u>inefficient</u> household
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Tight ▪ Cost effective ▪ Eco-friendly ▪ Dark 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Large ▪ Cold ▪ Old ▪ Unhealthy (black mould forming)

- **Awareness and understanding of energy efficiency programmes in NI:** Participants were not aware of any energy efficiency programmes that currently operate in Northern Ireland, but said they had received postal advertising from energy companies encouraging them to switch energy providers. When prompted (different schemes were explained to participants), the group were still unable to recall hearing about the Affordable Warmth Scheme, Boiler Replacement Scheme and/or NISEP previously.
- **Opinions of energy efficiency programmes:** Focus group participants held the opinion that the various schemes on offer are good, but feel that they need to be more heavily advertised. Participants explained that energy efficiency programmes are more likely to be a concern for landlords rather than private renters (as they involve making structural changes to the home). For this reason, and a perception that application would be a lengthy process (taking weeks or months), participants said they were unlikely to apply for the schemes. The group was in agreement that, based on current eligibility criteria, NISEP

schemes are likely to benefit those in older homes, elderly householders and low income households. Participants explained that this was fair, considering these are vulnerable groups who are not likely to have much control over their situation. However, it was also suggested that households should not need to have “no heating” or “broken beyond repair heating” to apply.

- **Paying for NISEP:** The group held the belief that the government is most likely to be funding NISEP. When told about the electricity levy they pay, participants suggested that they would be willing to pay more, based on the perception that £3.40 is going to help someone in need. When asked to complete the “poker chip” activity, the group allocated priority to certain vulnerable households (elderly households, renters on low incomes and “old” houses that require updating):

All households	Low income households 
Families with 1+ children	Single parent households with dependent children
Households with elderly people 	Young singles/couples with no dependent children
Households with a disability	Other - “old houses” 

- **The importance of energy efficiency schemes:** Focus group participants felt that the various energy efficiency schemes that operate in Northern Ireland are important, as they help to reduce pollution. The group expressed the view that the biggest priority for these schemes at the moment is to promote them more (via television, other forms of advertising or a letter in their electricity bill), but also suggested that the NISEP eligibility criteria for various schemes could be reviewed to include those with a heating system that may be close to breaking (rather than only already broken)

Group 11 - rural households

Included 6 participants from the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council area, all aged 35+ and from a rural area (e.g. Fintona). Mix of gender and social group. Some lived with children, others only with partners, and one lived alone. All participants had oil heating.

- **Attitude toward/perceptions of energy efficiency:** The group explained that they engage in certain behaviours in order to save energy, including limiting the use of heat to certain rooms and times of the day. Most members of the group had made structural changes/add-ons to their home in order to improve their energy efficiency – one participant had installed solar panels, most had double glazing and insulation, and one participant built their own home and had installed a heat recovery system in the process. Participants explained that their primary motivation behind engaging in these behaviours and making these structural changes in their home has been to save money.

“I can’t say I do these things to save the world as such. I do it to save money.”

“My house is only three years old. I probably put a fair bit of effort into the construction in order to save as much as I could.”

The group explained that they would like to make further structural changes to their home to improve their energy efficiency, but upfront costs prevent them from doing so. A number of participants said they would like to switch to gas if it was available in their area and the price was “right”. The group also explained that the last time they made changes to their home was when it was first purchased or built.

“It’s very easy to do all that at the start, if you build a house. But I live in a bungalow - the only way I would be able to do all that is if I take the roof off.”

“We’ve been in our house a long time now, but when we bought it we did replace things... double glazing, oil, things like that.”

“It’s all about the money.”

Words used to describe an energy <u>efficient</u> household	Words used to describe an energy <u>inefficient</u> household
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sensor lights ▪ LED lighting ▪ Not my children (leave lights on and radiator on) ▪ Thermostats 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cold ▪ Expensive ▪ Costly ▪ Damp ▪ Uncomfortable

The group expressed the view that “energy efficiency” isn’t a problem for most households, however all participants had heard of the term “fuel poverty”, and believed that this is an issue in Northern Ireland. Participants explained that whilst certain groups are “suffering”, there may be some people who choose to be fuel poor by spending their income on discretionary items, including cigarettes and alcohol.

- **Awareness and understanding of energy efficiency programmes in NI:** One participant had heard of the Affordable Warmth Scheme and knew about the provision and income criteria applicable. Once prompted, all participants were familiar with the Boiler Replacement Scheme. No participants had heard of NISEP.
- **Opinions of energy efficiency programmes:** Participants felt that the application (income threshold) criteria for the Affordable Warmth Scheme was too limiting. The group expressed a level of scepticism toward the other energy efficiency schemes, based on the assumption that there is likely to be a catch of some sort or onerous application process that is not immediately apparent. A few examples of the different NISEP schemes were shown to participants. The group held the opinion that these “sound good”, but were still wary of what “red tape” might be in place.

On the Affordable Warmth Scheme - “I think at £20,000 per income per house, I can imagine it rules quite a few people out.”

“Is that not always in the back of your mind, the perception that no matter what they’re offering, by the time you go through the red tape they rule you out? So you never bother to look at any of those because you’ll never get them.”

“You get nothing for nothing.”

The group spent some time discussing stories they had heard of people who had looked into various grants (including the Boiler Replacement Scheme) only to find that it cost them much more than the amount saved or any benefits ensued.

“I know a few years ago somebody that applied for the [Boiler Replacement Scheme] and because it was an old boiler, whenever he applied for this grant inspectors came out and there had to be some kind of a whole system put in. He was out a lot of money, and it cost him as much as he saved. He ended up having to do a whole lot of work because there were new measures in place that weren’t in place whenever he got the original boiler. He said if he had of known he wouldn’t have done it. There’s a whole lot of expense that you don’t see at the beginning. It’s never as simple as it sounds.”

“It’s good to hear that there is something for the really poor person.”

- Participants also held the belief that the schemes should operate under one agency (so that if someone isn’t eligible for Affordable Warmth, then they are automatically directed to NISEP or the Boiler Replacement Scheme), and need to be better advertised. It was considered that NISEP that should be advertised in local papers and/or through community groups.
- **Paying for NISEP:** Participants were not sure about how NISEP is funded, and were not aware that they, as electricity users, pay a certain amount per year toward the programme. The group felt that they should have been informed that they are paying this amount, but considered £3.40 to be a fair amount. Participants completed the “poker chip” activity, explaining that those most in need should be prioritised for NISEP schemes. The group was of the belief that the best way to do this fairly was to make the programme eligible to everyone, however allocate the majority of funding to certain vulnerable groups (e.g. low

income, provided the householder is in employment, elderly with a low pension, and families). The group was in agreement that in all cases, NISEP applicants should be means tested.

<p>All households - means tested</p> 	<p>Low income households - working</p> 
<p>Families with 1+ children</p> 	<p>Single parent households with dependent children</p> 
<p>Households with elderly people</p> 	<p>Young singles/couples with no dependent children</p>
<p>Households with a disability</p> 	<p>Other</p>

- The importance of energy efficiency schemes:** Overall, participants feel that NISEP and other schemes do play an important role and help a variety of vulnerable groups. Participants were in agreement that in order to improve the programme, awareness is the most pressing issue NISEP managers need to consider. It was considered that people need to be better informed about NISEP.

Group 12 - low income households

Included 8 participants from the Mid and East Antrim Borough Council area, all aged 35+, in the C2DE social category, and earning less than £30,000 per year as a couple or £23,000 per year as a single. Mix of home ownership (private renter/home owners) and genders.

- **Attitude toward/perceptions of energy efficiency:** When asked if they do anything in their homes to save energy, the group initially said “no”. However, upon reflection some participants explained that they do try to keep lights off when they are not in the room, keep heating down, and use electrical appliances conservatively. A number also indicated that they had insulated their roof space/walls a couple of years ago. One participant had their boiler replaced to a more “efficient” system, and another said that they regularly service their boiler. The group cited two major barriers that prevent them from saving energy or making further structural changes to their home: cost and uncertainty around processes that are not easy (difficulty finding out how to go about organising an installation, who to contact, and the best way to get it done without being charged too much). The group held the belief that energy efficiency is a problem in Northern Ireland. A number of participants were familiar with the term “fuel poverty”. When it was explained to the group that a household is said to be in fuel poverty if it spends 10% or more of its income or more on its heating and electricity, the group considered that this would apply to most of Northern Ireland (heating costs have risen). Participants indicated that low income households and elderly households are most likely to be affected by fuel poverty.

Words used to describe an energy <u>efficient</u> household	Words used to describe an energy <u>inefficient</u> household
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Economical ▪ Solar panels ▪ Modern ▪ Wind turbine ▪ Fuel efficient ▪ No draughts ▪ Triple glazing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Old ▪ High ceilings ▪ Poorly built ▪ Low ventilation ▪ Single glazed

- **Awareness and understanding of energy efficiency programmes in NI:** Most participants had heard of or availed of some sort of energy efficiency scheme provision in the past, however few were able to list the names of the schemes. One participant had enquired about an energy efficiency scheme a few years ago to get roof insulation whilst she was on income support, however the company (participant was unable to recall scheme name or who it was offered by) was not able to fund the installation because her roof space was too big. Another participant had availed of something similar through the Council three years ago, and was able to get £700 back on her loft insulation. After the group was briefed on the Affordable Warmth Scheme, Boiler Replacement Scheme and NISEP, participants were asked to provide their opinions. Upon hearing these names, some participants were able to recall enquiring or looking into the Affordable Warmth and Boiler Replacement schemes:

Affordable Warmth Scheme – “That’s the one that I had, but he said to me he’ll have to charge me an extra £800, and I said ‘I’m not paying that for a loft’. He goes ‘oh, we can only do like a tiny bit of the loft because it’s a big roof.’”

Boiler Replacement Scheme – “The paperwork, the hoops you had to jump through, the crap you had to go through... then to verify that your boiler was old enough, and you had to get a certain amount of quotes from different people... building control and all that. There’s just so much.”

- **Opinions of energy efficiency programmes:** Participants expressed the initial view that NISEP schemes sound “great” and need to be better advertised. However, one participant made the comment that not many people would have “no heating”, and others pointed out that very few have “Economy 7 heating”. Based on this understanding, the group suggested that the application criteria be reviewed by the Utility Regulator. Focus group participants expressed concern that the companies who are providing NISEP schemes may be benefiting from them.

“There must be a very limited supply now days. To me, it’s almost like they know they have a limited amount of people – it’s a ticking the box [exercise]. It doesn’t make a difference. It’s such a nominal amount of people that could be viable for that who would actually benefit, whereas the houses that most people are living in could do with x and y with a bit of help.”

“They [scheme managers] are going for the headline that ‘oh you can get all this here’, but a minimum amount of people can actually meet the criteria.”

“I don’t think I would be eligible.”

- **Paying for NISEP:** Focus group participants were unaware of how NISEP is funded. When this was explained to the group, participants considered this to be reasonable. However, a level of scepticism was raised in relation to whether all of the funding is used.
- When completing the “poker chip” activity, participants were of the opinion that funding should be prioritised to low income households who are working. It was considered that this category gives precedence to certain vulnerable groups (e.g. families with children) through this category, but is broad enough to extend to all who may need it. Whilst the poker chip activity generated a lot of discussion in this group, participants were unable to complete the exercise.
- **The importance of energy efficiency schemes:** The group suggested that NISEP managers reconsider the application criteria as it stands and who is being helped. It was considered that individual assessments may be a better method of allocating funding (giving priority to households who are most in need). Participants also felt NISEP should be advertised more widely and frequently. Participants suggested a range of platforms to promote NISEP on, including television advertising, radio advertising, billboards and leaflets.

Group 8 - households with non-dependent children

Included 8 Mid Ulster District Council participants, all aged 35+ and living with at least one non-dependent child (over 18 years of age). Most participants had oil heating, and one had electric heating. Mix of incomes and social group.

- **Time, date, and location of focus group session:** 7PM, 3 October, Dungannon
- **Attitude toward/perceptions of energy efficiency:** Participants explained that they switch appliances and lights off when they can. A number indicated that they also use energy saving light bulbs. This group was more likely than others to have made structural changes to their home or avail of an energy efficiency scheme: many of the participants explained that they had made improvements to their home within the last three to five years in order to save money. One participant had solar panels installed, two had received a fully funded attic insulation through an energy efficiency scheme (was unable to recall scheme’s name), and two had a new boiler put in (one had availed of a grant to receive funding towards this). Participants rated saving energy as being very important to them. The group was in agreement that they would like to make more changes to their home to improve its energy efficiency, including gas insulation and double glazing. A number had looked into solar panel insulation. Participants explained that a major barrier to making these further changes was the cost involved.

Words used to describe an energy <u>efficient</u> household	Words used to describe an energy <u>inefficient</u> household
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Insulation ▪ Solar ▪ Heavy curtains ▪ Cooks with gas ▪ Double/triple glazing ▪ Wi-Fi ▪ Draught catcher 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ No heat system ▪ Single glazing ▪ Children ▪ No cavity insulation ▪ Bad fitting doors and windows ▪ Lack of loft insulation ▪ Bungalow ▪ Non-bill payers ▪ Old ▪ Draughts

- The group was in agreement that energy efficiency is a problem in Northern Ireland, however less than half (3/8) had heard of the term “fuel poverty”.
- **Awareness and understanding of energy efficiency programmes in NI:** Participants from this group knew of/had heard of various provisions in place but were unsure of the details. Whilst two participants had availed of an energy efficiency scheme, they were not able to recall the names of the scheme or programme. The group was in agreement that the schemes are not well advertised, and that those who know about them take active steps to keep informed about the different schemes on offer and who is eligible:

“They have ongoing things but it’s like everything, you need to be ringing up and asking... I think there’s things ongoing all the time but unless you are really looking about it you’ll not be told about it.”

“I know somebody here at the minute who is unemployed and lives on their own and their chimney was smoking because they have an open fire, and it’s something to do with the flue. They can apply to the council, and the council will hopefully give them a grant through the Housing Executive, even though they own their own home, to fix the flue ‘cause it’s about £400-£500 pound to fix.”

- **Opinions of energy efficiency programmes:** The group expressed the opinion that the schemes were not advertised enough and are not likely to make a meaningful difference to those who are eligible (particularly grants that only offer partial funding toward an installation, as people on low incomes cannot afford to pay the remainder of the cost). Participants also felt that the current eligibility criteria for many of the NISEP and Affordable Warmth Schemes is restrictive as not many households, even if they earn a low amount, are likely to have no heating or broken beyond repair heating.

“It [energy efficiency] doesn’t seem to be a priority here in NI. You had the Affordable Warmth Scheme... but there has been no real push to put it in among energy providers.”

“Very few people know about them [energy efficiency schemes]. They’re not well advertised, because I didn’t know about it. I got the ventilation done in my roof space but only because I was unemployed.”

“They have something through the Housing Executive, but I think even then you have to jump through lots of hoops to get it, and it’s not very well advertised at all. You have to seek it out rather than them saying it’s available.”

On Boiler replacement scheme - “When you own your own house you don’t get help with anything. For instance, to get a new boiler in. You need two and a half whatever, and I don’t have that sort of money, you know what I mean? I’m paying a mortgage on my own... by the time I pay the bills I have no spare money like that lying about. So I knew about it and I didn’t go for it. They’re not really helping you. I mean £450 pounds is not really a big help to put a new boiler in. It’s still a couple of grand. I would have to take a loan out to do that and then pay it back.”

“I actually feel that the unemployed are a priority in this country. If you’re working you don’t get help with anything, but if you are unemployed you get your rent paid for, you get anything done to your house.”

- Concern was raised over the application process. Participants considered that applying to the different schemes was likely to be a complicated and difficult process. The group was also sceptical of how funding is allocated and if private companies are profiting from the NISEP schemes.
- **Paying for NISEP:** The group was not aware of how NISEP is paid for, and assumed that the programme is likely to be government funded. Participants were surprised to hear that they pay a small amount to fund NISEP, and feel that they should be better informed about this by the organisation who is extracting the amount. Views were mixed on whether paying this amount was fair. Whilst some participants held the opinion that £3.40 is a small amount that they are happy to pay if are told about, others expressed the view that they should not be forced to pay anything unless they would be personally able to avail of the NISEP

schemes. The group came to agreement in the “poker chip” activity that all households should be able to apply for NISEP, however certain vulnerable households should receive priority funding (including low income households, families with one or more children or dependent children, households with elderly people and households with a disability):

<p>All households</p> 	<p>Low income households</p> 
<p>Families with 1+ children</p> 	<p>Single parent households with dependent children</p> 
<p>Households with elderly people</p> 	<p>Young singles/couples with no dependent children</p>
<p>Households with a disability</p> 	<p>Other</p>

- **The importance of energy efficiency schemes:** The group was in agreement that it is important to have energy efficiency programmes in Northern Ireland, but feel that certain changes could be made to improve the way these programmes are modelled and advertised:
 - One participant suggested that it would be a good idea to partner with Credit Unions, and provide low or no loans to those who are able to get a partially funded grant but still cannot pay the remainder of installation costs.
 - Focus group participants also expressed the view that NISEP is currently restricting many of its schemes to households with “no heating” or “broken beyond repair heating”. It was considered that broadening eligibility criteria would have a net positive impact on fuel poverty levels in Northern Ireland.
 - The group felt it important to make sure that applying to NISEP is an easy process – lengthy forms should be avoided.
 - Participants consider that the electricity levy could be explained to all Northern Ireland households and that NISEP managers need to be transparent about where these funds go to.

Group 9 - gas & housing association households

Included 8 participants from the Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council area, all living in social housing with gas heating in their home, aged 35+. A mix of gender was achieved. Most participants identified as C2DE.

- **Attitude toward/perceptions of energy efficiency:** Participants explained that they tend to limit the use of heat and electricity in their home in order to save energy and money (e.g. avoiding the use of appliances, keeping thermostat at a low setting etc.) A number said they have looked into installing other measures (e.g. new boiler) however explained that the cost of doing so has prevented them from having the work done. There was also a perception among the group that landlords should be responsible for making structural changes to the home, rather than tenants.

“If you don’t own your property, why would you put money into someone else’s property?”

“It’s up to the landlord.”

- Participants were in agreement that energy efficiency is a problem for Northern Ireland, and has been for the last 20 years or so. The group was told that the fuel poverty rate in Northern Ireland is currently at 22%. This figure was considered to be lower than expected.

“I think that’s wrong. I would love to know where that figure [22%] came from.”

“I would say probably about 70% of households are affected [by fuel poverty].”

“We’ve not seen everyone having the same standard of central heating, in the last 20 years at least.”

Words used to describe an energy <u>efficient</u> household	Words used to describe an energy <u>inefficient</u> household
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ More efficient ▪ Combi-boiler ▪ Solar ▪ Green ▪ Spend money to save money 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Not worth living in ▪ Cold ▪ Expensive ▪ Neglected ▪ Wasteful ▪ Damp ▪ Old fashioned

- **Awareness and understanding of energy efficiency programmes in NI:** 7/8 participants indicated that they had heard of energy efficiency programmes in the past, however were not sure about the names of the different provisions. One participant was

aware of the Affordable Warmth Scheme, however explained that he heard of the programme through his work (previously employed with an energy provider). After being prompted, all participants recognised/said they had heard of the Boiler Replacement Scheme. No participants were familiar with the name “NISEP” or “Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme”, however some recognised the name “Cosy Homes” (one of the schemes available for housing association tenants). The group was of the opinion that NISEP’s schemes are not well advertised. Those who were familiar with a scheme explained that they had received a letter through their door, which is how they first found out about it.

- **Opinions of energy efficiency programmes:** The group was of the opinion that housing association and housing executive tenants should be entitled to all of the schemes that private renters and homeowners can avail of. A number of participants also commented on other eligibility criteria, including income thresholds and broken/no heating requirements relating to NISEP’s fully funded priority schemes. It was considered that these measures are likely to be excluding a number of vulnerable households from availing of NISEP.

On Affordable Warmth scheme - “It’s just for private renters, so that’s not really suitable for housing association tenants”.

On Boiler Replacement Scheme – “I think that’s NIHE tenants discriminated against again for energy efficiency in Northern Ireland. At the end of the day, everybody is paying their rent. If you pay your rent you should be able to apply.”

On NISEP schemes – “It’s only suitable for some people. So at the end of the day unless you fall into that criteria you can’t avail of it, so it’s no good.”

“To me these schemes try to keep housing association tenants in a low bracket – less priority. It’s as if we’re all down and outs, which is not the case. Some people are put into positions, and at the end of the day they don’t have a job for certain reasons, it’s not your fault. Even the people who are working, maybe two or three jobs, they still can’t get these schemes.”

“I’d be interested in knowing where exactly are they advertising these things? They all need more marketing. There is a complete lack of communication.”

“How long has this programme been running, six years? That’s why it’s going so wrong. One, no one sees it, and two, who’s going to meet all the criteria?”

On £250 grant insulation NISEP scheme – “Why would you put your hand in your pocket to pay for insulation for someone else’s property? I wouldn’t spend £2, let alone £300.”

- The group was also shown NISEP schemes designed specifically for housing association properties: Cosy Homes, Housing Association Energy Saver, and Cosy Homes Insulation. Participants were in agreement that the schemes were not comprehensive enough to cater for the needs of housing association tenants.

“It’s their houses, they should be funding the whole lot.”

“We’re not being equally treated.”

“They should come and do it, and you don’t have to pay anything. It’s their house, it’s going to benefit them in the future. It’s the landlord’s responsibility as well.”

“The housing association, fair play to them for getting these grants or whatever, but it’s limited.”

- **Paying for NISEP:** Participants were unaware of the electricity levy that households pay towards NISEP. The group explained that if told about this levy (e.g. through their bill or otherwise informed) and were personally eligible to participate in NISEP’s fully funded priority schemes, then they would not mind paying £3.40 a year. A certain level of scepticism was also raised in relation to the funds that have been collected towards NISEP and the number of measures that have been installed since 2012 (this was considered lower than expected). Participants communicated a concern that management may be profiting from the scheme (e.g. by keeping the interest collected from funds received or withholding/limiting scheme participation). The group then completed the “poker chip” activity. There was agreement that whilst all households should be eligible for NISEP schemes, certain vulnerable groups should be given priority (including those on a low income, elderly people and households with a disability):

<p>All households</p> 	<p>Low income households</p> 
<p>Families with 1+ children</p>	<p>Single parent households with dependent children</p>
<p>Households with elderly people</p> 	<p>Young singles/couples with no dependent children</p>

Households with a disability	Other
	

“So we’re funding it? It should be available to all of us then.”

“That has never been on the back of any of my bills. I feel misled because we haven’t been informed and we don’t know.”

“If it was available to everyone, then I would personally be okay with it. It would be like paying taxes.”

“Are they fully transparent about what they are actually doing with the money? They would make interest off the £3.40 from everybody, so do they then use that interest for these schemes, or are they skimming that money themselves? Because if the potential exists for someone to make money, they usually do. There’s bound to be people at the top making money out of this, that’s just the way of the world.”

- **The importance of energy efficiency schemes:** The group expressed the view that energy efficiency schemes are important to have in Northern Ireland, however need to be better advertised and widened (allowing more people to participate). Participants suggested promoting NISEP and others through television advertising, billboards, and bus stops.

“It is a good incentive for those who can avail of it.”

“It’s a good idea for them to have it, it’s something you know, rather than them not having anything in place.”

Group 5 - disability households

Included 9 participants from the Belfast City Council area, identifying as a disability household. A mix of carers/disability participants was achieved. 7 participants had gas heating, one had oil, and one was a renter with Economy 7 heating.

- **Attitude toward/perceptions of energy efficiency:** The group explained that they keep their thermostat to a low setting, shut doors to keep draughts out and use LED light bulbs in order to conserve energy in their home. All agreed that saving energy is important to them, primarily to save money. Carers in the group considered it important to keep their homes warm to cater for those with a disability in their house. One participant had cavity wall insulation built in their home, another had installed fibre glass.

“If you’re saving energy you are also saving money, but sometimes being warmer is more important. I live with my mum, and she has rheumatoid arthritis, so when she gets cold it affects her more.”

- Participants felt fuel poverty to be an issue in Northern Ireland, and estimated that half of households are currently affected. The group was surprised to hear that 22% is the current estimate for fuel poverty levels in Northern Ireland.

“I think it might be a lot higher because a lot of people may be ashamed to say that they don’t have enough money to heat their house. [Another participant: I’ve actually been like that myself at one stage.]”

Words used to describe an energy <u>efficient</u> household	Words used to describe an energy <u>inefficient</u> household
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Comfortable ▪ Modern ▪ Good value ▪ Saves money ▪ Happy ▪ Cosy ▪ Eco 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cold ▪ Expensive ▪ Smelly/damp ▪ Unhappy ▪ G rating ▪ Dark ▪ Rip-off

- **Awareness and understanding of energy efficiency programmes in NI:** Most participants (6/9) said that they had heard of the Boiler Replacement Scheme, and two had availed of the programme. Participants were also familiar with a Winter Fuel Payment given to elderly households to help cover the costs of heating their home. Whilst one participant had heard of the Affordable Warmth Scheme through her work (community sector), most were not aware of any other energy efficiency schemes in Northern Ireland (the group had not heard of NISEP).
- **Opinions of energy efficiency programmes:** Participants were provided with a summary of the Affordable Warmth Scheme, Boiler Replacement Scheme, and shown four examples of NISEP schemes including Energy Plus, Energy Saver Homes, Home comfort and the £250 insulation grant. The group discussed the merits of each of these schemes, however considered the eligibility criteria to be a limiting factor which may affect the

number who are able to avail. The group also held the opinion that NISEP could be promoted or advertised more through television, social networks, billboards, and bus stops or on letters accompanying energy bills.

On The Affordable Warmth Scheme – “It’s helping people, but it would be nice if you could earn up to £30,000 or something like that. It’s a bit low at the minute.”

On The Boiler Replacement Scheme – “I think when I did it five years ago it was [up to] £2,000 so it really made a big saving. The £1,000 is a bit low, but it’s better than nothing.”

On NISEP schemes – “Are there that many houses that don’t have heating in them?”

On NISEP schemes – “You would wonder how long people would have to wait if they do have heating that’s broke.”

On NISEP schemes – “There’s a lot of criteria, you have to tick the boxes to get this, you know?”

On NISEP schemes – “The income criteria... it’s alright saying £35,000 [a year], but different people have different debts, so how do you differentiate?”

“Why isn’t the advice service where I work getting all of that information [about NISEP schemes] to hand to customers? You’re telling all of us and we didn’t know about it.”

- Participants expressed the view that NISEP schemes are unlikely to reach/benefit renters. One member of this group rented privately and had Economy 7 heating in their home. She explained had hoped to change to gas, however the landlord threatened to increase her rent. It was considered by the group that the NISEP schemes would ultimately cost private tenants money and instead benefit landlords:

Economy 7 participant - “I have three bedrooms and not even a radiator in one of them. There’s not even a radiator in the kitchen. There’s an electric radiator in the bathroom. The landlord said to me ‘we’re not putting gas in your house, unless we put your rent up’, and I says ‘well I’m not paying it.’”

“If its private rented you’d expect your landlord to pay for your heating system.”

- The group was provided statistics of the number of measures put into homes through NISEP from 2012 to date. An estimate of the amount spent and benefits generated for customers was also supplied. The group considered the number of installations and amount spent by NISEP operators to be low.

“50 million is a lot of money to us, but to a Government it’s pennies.”

“That could be about five to ten percent of the population [who have availed of a NISEP scheme] for all we know. I mean, I don’t know anyone who has qualified for a scheme.”

- **Paying for NISEP:** Participants were not aware of how NISEP is funded. It was explained to the group that electricity users pay a small amount each year towards the programme, depending on the amount of electricity used in their home. The group thought that £3.40

was a low and fair amount to pay, but considered it important that households are made aware that this money is going towards NISEP:

“It probably doesn’t make a difference because you don’t notice that you pay it anyway.”

“I know it’s a small amount, but it shouldn’t be taken without your knowledge.”

“It’s all about if it’s going to benefit you in the long run too. We’re paying something for those schemes but we’re not going to qualify for most of them as well, you know?”

- The group then completed the “poker chip” activity, explaining that vulnerable groups should be given priority to participate in NISEP schemes. The group allocated the majority of their poker chips to low income households, as it was considered that this category would include a wide array of vulnerable households and is not too specific as to exclude various groups of people that would likely benefit from a NISEP scheme.

<p style="text-align: center;">All households</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Low income households</p> 
<p style="text-align: center;">Families with 1+ children</p> 	<p style="text-align: center;">Single parent households with dependent children</p> 
<p style="text-align: center;">Households with elderly people</p> 	<p style="text-align: center;">Young singles/couples with no dependent children</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Households with a disability</p> 	<p style="text-align: center;">Other</p>

- **The importance of energy efficiency schemes:** The group was in agreement that energy efficiency programmes including NISEP were important to have in Northern Ireland because they likely benefit a number of home owners and vulnerable people on low incomes. The group expressed the view that NISEP needs to be advertised widely across Northern Ireland in order to improve awareness and understanding.

Appendix C: Semi-structured interview topic guide

Warm up (10 mins)

Section overview: warm up exercise to give some background to the research, and to clarify their role as NISEP participants and our role as researchers.

- **Introduce research and self**
- **Explain how in-depth interviews work**
- **Explain use of audio recorder**
- **Explain confidentiality and reporting procedures**
- **Ask participants to introduce themselves**
 - Prompt: can you tell me which scheme you applied to?
 - Prompt: what was the name? Which company supplies the scheme?
 - Prompt: why did you pick that scheme to apply to?
 - Prompt: how did you first hear about the scheme?
 - Prompt: what measures did you get through the scheme? (e.g. cavity wall insulation?)
 - Prompt: did it cost you anything? How much did it cost? How much of this did you have to pay? (e.g. received a grant and paid remainder?)

Awareness & overall perception of the programme (5 mins)

Section overview: to uncover how participants became aware of NISEP, their understanding of the funding model and their overall opinion about the programme.

- **Can you talk me through how you first heard about NISEP/scheme mentioned above?**
- **What was the application process like?**
 - Prompt: can you talk me through the steps you had to take to apply?
 - Prompt: was applying straightforward/confusing/difficult/easy?
 - Prompt: why did you apply for this scheme as opposed to others available?

Perceived benefits associated with programme participation (10 mins)

Section overview: to uncover participants' perception with regards to NISEPs benefits.

- **What are the main benefits of participating in the NISEP scheme?**
 - Prompt: why do you say that?
 - Prompt: can you give any examples to show how that helped you?
 - Prompt: what's the top 3 advantages of participating in NISEP?

Perceived drawbacks associated with programme participation (10 mins)

Section overview: to uncover participants' perception with regards to disadvantages or drawbacks of using NISEP.

- **Can you think of any drawbacks of this programme or negative effects...?**
 - Prompt: why do you say that?
 - Prompt: can you give any examples to show how that has had a negative impact?

Prompt: you mentioned some challenges. How do you manage them/how are they managed?

Perceived effectiveness of the service (15 mins)

Section overview: to uncover participants' perception with regards to specific elements of the NISEP scheme.

- **How effective do you feel the service is?**
 - Prompt: **the application process**, the installation process, any follow-up
 - The quality of the measures/workmanship
 - Prompt: **helping those in fuel poverty/need of energy support**
 - Prompt: **the funding model (energy users pay for NISEP via a small payment)**
- **Are you satisfied with the service (application, installation, follow-up) you received?**
 - Prompt: why/why not?
 - Prompt: higher/lower than expected?
 -
- **What differences have you noticed since you had the measures installed?**
 - Prompt: is your house warmer?
 - Prompt: is your house more comfortable?
 - Prompt: are your electricity/fuel bills lower?
 - Prompt: any lifestyle changes (e.g. spending more time in the house, thinking more about energy efficiency)?
- **Does your house need any other energy efficiency improvements?**

Understanding of NISEP funding (5 mins)

Section overview: to uncover if and/or to what extent participants are aware of how NISEP is funded.

- **Do you know how NISEP is funded?**
 - Prompt: do you think that this is fair/appropriate?
 - Prompt: if not, then how do you think it should be funded, who should pay for it?

Suggestions improvements or ways of moving forward (10 mins)

Section overview: to uncover suggestions for improving the programme in the future.

- **What's your overall opinion of the programme?**
 - Prompt: would you recommend the programme to others? Why/why not?
 - Prompt: do you think the eligibility criteria is fair? (if necessary, explain that schemes are targeted at low income households)
- **What improvements, if any would you make to the programme?**
 - Prompt: why do you say that?

Further feedback (5 mins)

Section overview: to wrap up the session and provide opportunities for further comments/ key messages.

- **If given the opportunity, would you use/apply for a NISEP scheme again?**
 - Prompt: why/why not?

Would you recommend the NISEP/Scheme to someone else?

- **Do you have any feedback/comments you would like to make about the NISEP programme?**

Thank and close