



Conclusion of the Utility Regulator's Review of the firmus energy (Supply) Ltd Maximum Average Price in the Ten Towns area

Effective 1 April 2024



About the Utility Regulator

The Utility Regulator is the economic regulator for electricity, gas and water in Northern Ireland. We are the only multi-sectoral economic regulator in the UK covering both energy and water.

We are an independent non-ministerial government department and our main duty is to promote and protect the short- and long-term interests of consumers.

Our role is to make sure that the energy and water utility industries in Northern Ireland are regulated, and developed within ministerial policy, as set out in our statutory duties.

We are governed by a Board of Directors and are accountable to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

We are based at Queens House in Belfast. The Chief Executive and two Executive Directors lead teams in each of the main functional areas in the organisation: CEO Office; Price Controls, Networks and Energy Futures; and Markets and Consumer Protection.



Our mission

To protect the short- and long-term interests of consumers of electricity, gas and water.



Our vision

To ensure value and sustainability in energy and water.



Our values

- Be a best practice regulator: transparent, consistent, proportionate, accountable and targeted.
- Be professional – listening, explaining and acting with integrity.
- Be a collaborative, co-operative and learning team.
- Be motivated and empowered to make a difference.



Abstract

Protecting customers is at the heart of the Utility Regulator's role and ensuring that customers pay the correct price for gas from the price regulated supplier firmus energy Supply Ltd (FES) is a core part of our work.

We commenced a review of the maximum average price with FES in early January 2024. We have scrutinised the submission provided by FES to ensure that the maximum average price approved is not more than the sum of the costs allowed under the price control determination. This ensures that customers pay no more than the costs of purchasing and supplying gas, plus a pre-determined allowance for the operating costs of the business in addition to an agreed profit margin.

The maximum average price for FES' domestic and small business customers in the Ten Towns area will decrease from 312.28 pence per therm to 263.58 pence; which equates to a decrease of 15.6%.

Audience

Customers and customer groups, political representatives, stakeholders, industry and statutory bodies.

Consumer impact

FES' customers in the Ten Towns area will see an average decrease of 15.6% in their annual bill. This change will affect all domestic customers and small business customers using less than 2,500 therms per annum and will take effect from 1 April 2024.

The impact of the tariff change on a domestic credit customer with average consumption of 12,000 kWh per annum, will be a decrease of approximately £213 per annum (including VAT) on their gas bill.



1. Context

- 1.1 On 16 January 2024 the Utility Regulator (UR) - in consultation with firmus energy (Supply) Limited (FES), the Department for the Economy (DfE) and the Consumer Council Northern Ireland (CCNI) - began a review of the FES maximum average price for domestic customers and small business customers using less than 2,500 therms per annum. The current maximum average price has been effective from 1 October 2023 and covers approximately 67,000 domestic and small business customers within the Ten Towns area.
- 1.2 The UR carries out formal reviews of the FES maximum average price on a bi-annual basis (in advance of April and October). The UR can also initiate a further review at any stage should the wholesale cost of gas change significantly such that it would result in an increase or decrease of at least 5% to the maximum average price. On an ongoing basis we analyse the cost of wholesale gas on the forward curve, along with the forward purchases that FES has made to date.
- 1.3 This review was initiated to establish the new maximum average price to become effective from 1 April 2024. The review is a formal process agreed by the UR, FES, DfE and the CCNI.
- 1.4 FES uses the maximum average price to set the actual tariffs that are charged to customers. The tariffs are calculated on a weighted average basis, based on average usage and the number of customers using each tariff. FES cannot charge more than the maximum average price overall.
- 1.1 From 1 April 2024 the maximum average price for domestic and small business customers will be 263.58 pence per therm; decreasing from from 312.30 pence per therm in the current tariff which was last set on 1 October 2023. The tariff will be kept under constant review.
- 1.5 Table 1 below shows the changes since October 2023 to the annual bill payable by FES customers.

Table 1 – FES domestic credit tariff (based on 12,000 kWh consumption)

Rates and bills (All incl. VAT)	Oct 2023	Apr 2024
Tariff Rate (p / kWh)	11.361	9.589
Effective Annual Bill ¹ (£ / year)	£1,363	£1,151

¹ What the typical customer would pay



- 1.6 The new maximum average price has been modelled and forecast over a period of 12 months. However, it will be kept under constant review, we will continue to monitor gas prices to identify if an additional review is required within that time period if required. We will complete another formal review in advance of 1 October 2024.
- 1.7 The UR scrutinised FES' submission, ensuring that the maximum average charge per unit supplied is not more than the sum of the input costs allowed in the price control formula. On 20 February 2024, the UR held a meeting with FES, CCNI and DfE. Here, the rationale behind the proposed change was discussed and any questions addressed. Following agreement, the UR then wrote to Firmus Energy stating that pursuant to condition 2.4.2 of the firmus energy (Supply) Ltd licence for the supply of gas in Northern Ireland, we approved the decrease of the maximum average price per therm.



2. Background

- 2.1 In Northern Ireland, there are three distinct distribution areas for natural gas. These are the Greater Belfast area, the Ten Towns area and the West area. Phoenix Natural Gas Limited (PNGL) own and operate the distribution network in the Greater Belfast area, firmus energy (Distribution) Limited own and operate the distribution network in the Ten Towns area, while ²Evolve own and operate the distribution network in the West area.
- 2.2 FES holds a licence to supply gas to customers in the Ten Towns area. This licence was granted to FES with a period of exclusivity for supplying gas to customers within this area, meaning that FES was the only company allowed to supply gas within the Ten Towns during this period.
- 2.3 From 1 April 2015, the supply market in the Ten Towns area opened to competition from new entrant suppliers in all customer sectors. However FES are currently the only supplier for domestic consumers in this market. FES currently supply around 67,000 domestic and small business customers (referred to as “tariff” customers) in this area.
- 2.4 Under the terms of FES’s licence to supply gas, the UR (“the Authority”) has the power to control the maximum amount that FES can charge for gas. These controls apply when customers are not protected by competition. The FES licence states:

Control over charges

“The Licensee shall take all reasonable steps to secure that in any Relevant Year the average price per unit of gas supplied by it to Regulated Premises shall not exceed the maximum price calculated in accordance with Condition 2.4.2”³.

- 2.5 The details of the operation of FES’ supply price control are set out in each Licence. At present, the maximum allowed unit price of gas (Pst) for customers subject to price control is made up of a number of components:

$$\mathbf{Pst = Gt + Ut + St + Mt + Et - Kst}$$

- 2.6 The UR has established a price control determination which sets out FES’s allowed costs. The price control determination sets out how each of the cost elements which make up the maximum average price will be treated.

² Evolve is the trading name of SGN Evolve Network Ltd (former trading name was SGN Natural Gas Limited from April 2015 – September 2023).

³ [2023-01-11 firmus energy \(Supply\) Ltd - Supply Licence Ten Towns](#)



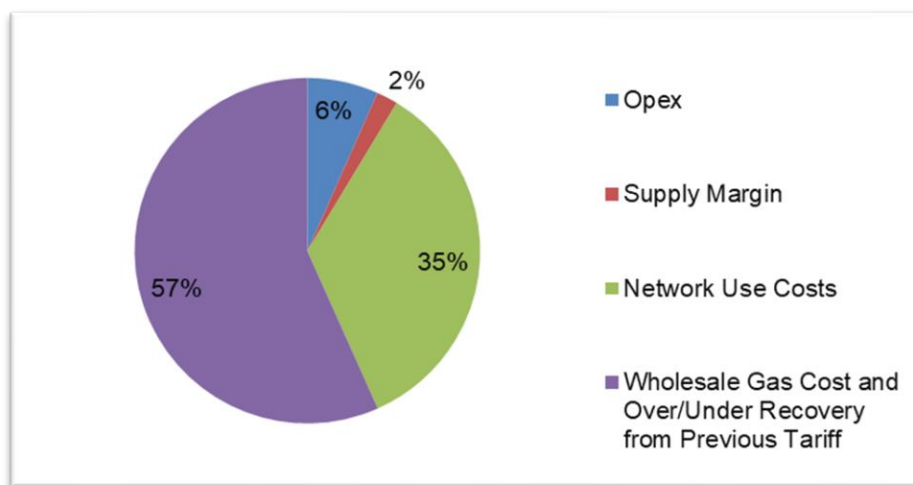
Elements of Maximum Average Price

2.7 The maximum average price is made up of a number of costs:

- Operating costs and supply margin;
- Network costs; and
- Wholesale cost of gas.

2.8 The breakdown is shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1 – Makeup of the maximum average price from 1 April 2024



2.9 The UR has taken an active role in scrutinising the costs within each of the elements of the maximum average price of FES's submission. FES uses the maximum average price to set the actual tariffs that are charged to customers, and FES cannot charge more than the maximum average price overall.

Operating Costs and Supply Margin

2.10 Operating costs are the costs necessary for FES to run its supply business for tariff customers. For example the costs of billing, meter reading, customer service, offices, salaries and IT systems etc. The operating costs were determined under the price control carried out by the UR.

2.11 The margin refers to the amount of profit FES is allowed to make. The margin was determined within the price control and was set at 2% of allowable turnover from tariff customers.



- 2.12 In September 2022 the UR published the final determination for the FES price control⁴ which indicates the total amount of revenue that the Licensee can recover, in any relevant year, in respect of their gas supply business.
- 2.13 The price control determination runs from 1 January 2023 to 31 December 2026.

Network Costs

- 2.14 Network costs cover the charges for the use of the Northern Ireland transmission and distribution systems. These charges are reviewed and approved by the UR as part of the network price controls.
- 2.15 The FES price control determined that the transmission and distribution system charges will be treated as pass through charges which means that the customer pays no more or less than the actual cost of the network charges.
- 2.16 The costs for the transmission system are those costs involved in bringing gas from Scotland to Northern Ireland, via the Scotland to Northern Ireland Pipeline, and all the transmission pipelines within Northern Ireland. These costs are published on the [Gas Market Operator NI](#) and [National Grid](#) websites
- 2.17 The costs for the distribution system are those costs associated with moving gas throughout the Ten Towns area to homes and businesses. On the 28 October 2022 the final determination on the price control for Northern Ireland's gas distribution networks for 2023-2028 (GD23), and associated licence modifications for consultation, were published. GD23 is the distribution price control for Phoenix Natural Gas Limited (PNGL), firmus energy (Distribution) Limited and Evolve which runs from 1 January 2023⁵. The distribution price control determines the amounts that firmus energy Distribution can charge for suppliers to use the Ten Towns network. These can be found on the [feDL website](#).

Wholesale Gas Costs

- 2.18 As determined within the FES price control, the gas cost element of the maximum average price incorporates the wholesale cost of gas as well as charges for transporting gas through Great Britain and costs for securing credit cover associated with purchasing wholesale gas.

⁴ [Final determination and proposed licence modifications for the firmus energy \(Supply\) Ltd 2023-2026 price control](#)

⁵ [Final determination GD23](#)



- 2.19 The FES price control determines that gas costs are treated as pass through which means that the customer pays no more or less than the actual cost of gas. Therefore, where wholesale gas costs decrease or increase over those set in the tariff, the resulting savings or additional costs are passed on to the customer.
- 2.20 FES has a gas purchasing strategy in place which means that it purchases a percentage of its forecast volumes in advance on an ongoing basis. This is known as hedging and limits the exposure to more short-term fluctuations in wholesale gas prices, and therefore aims to create more stability in the gas price for customers. It is important to note that FES' hedging strategy will be specific to it, and due to the specific timing of forward gas purchases the price paid will be different from other suppliers who will purchase different volumes at different time periods (and hence at different prices as the gas market moves on a daily basis). Hence, the overall wholesale cost of FES will likely always differ somewhat from that of other gas suppliers even though they are purchasing from the same gas market.
- 2.21 At the time of review, the overall cost of gas for the maximum average price is estimated based on a combination of actual forward gas purchases that have already been secured, along with forecast volumes of gas required, and the forecast wholesale cost of that gas which has yet to be bought (based on the gas price forward curve). Buying gas in advance (hedging) can help to reduce any over/under recoveries building up as the price of the hedged gas in the maximum average price is known when the price is set.

Over/Under Recovery from Previous Tariff Periods

- 2.22 Wholesale gas costs make up a large component of the final maximum average price and as these costs can be volatile there will always be a difference between the outturn cost of the wholesale gas that has yet to be purchased compared to the forecast costs that were included when the maximum average price was set.
- 2.23 Where the wholesale gas costs out turn less than was forecast in the maximum average price, FES will 'over recover'. This means that they recovered more money from customers than they spent on gas costs, and they will subsequently refund the over recovered difference to customers in the following tariff period.



- 2.24 Alternatively, where the wholesale gas costs turn out higher than forecast in the maximum average price, FES will 'under recover'. This means they spent more on gas costs than they recovered from customers, and they will therefore be able to recharge the under recovered difference to customers in the following tariff period. This ensures that customers only pay for the actual cost of gas.
- 2.25 Therefore, each maximum average price includes an amount of over or under recovery which was accumulated during the previous tariff periods.
- 2.26 Both FES and the UR strive to keep the over/under recovered amount as low as possible in order to avoid distortion of the maximum average price. This is carried out through ongoing monitoring and tariff changes being put through when over or under recoveries are accumulating to such an extent that they would adversely affect the tariff.



3. Why is the Maximum Average Price for FES decreasing?

3.1 The maximum average price for FES' tariff customers in the Ten Towns area will decrease to 263.58 p/therm from 1 April 2024. Both Table 2 and Figure 2 on the next pages show the movement in the regulated maximum average price from April 2015 (the first FES regulated tariff) to date.

Table 2 - Historic maximum average price

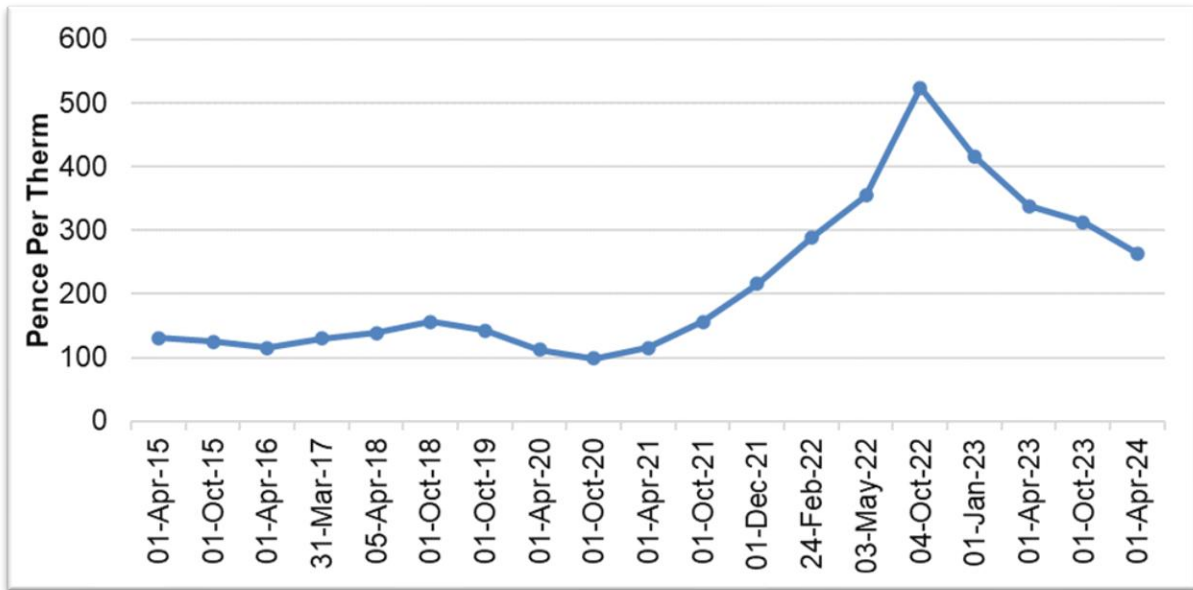
Effective from date	Approved Maximum Average Price (p/therm)
01-Apr-15	130.85
01-Oct-15	125.16 ⁶
01-Apr-16	115.51
31-Mar-17	130.27 ⁷
05-Apr-18	139.10
01-Oct-18	155.80
01-Oct-19	142.14
01-Apr-20	112.07
01-Oct-20	98.08
01-Apr-21	115.48
01-Oct-21	156.07
01-Dec-21	215.66
24-Feb-22	288.06
03-May-22	335.04
03-Oct-22	523.71
1-Jan-23	416.25
1 Apr-23	337.83
1 Oct-23	312.28
1 Apr-24	263.58

⁶ This figure has been restated to take into account updated volume forecasts. At 01-Oct-15 the approved Maximum Average Price was 124.44 p/therm

⁷ This figure has been recalculated to take account the removal of EUC2 customers from the regulated tariff. Previously the approved Maximum Average Price was 129.57 p/therm.



Figure 2 - Historic maximum average price

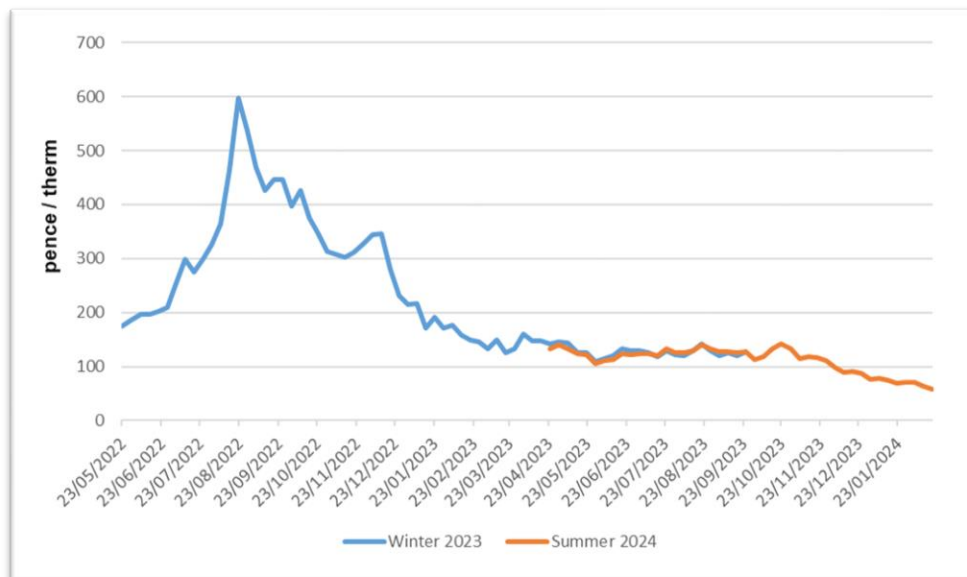


3.2 The overall decrease in the FES maximum average price is primarily due to the decrease in the cost of wholesale gas.

Decrease in Forecast Cost of Wholesale Gas

3.3 Following sustained increases to the cost of wholesale gas throughout Europe since mid 2021, generally speaking prices have been falling since the end of summer 2022 and have remained relatively stable during 2023 and early 2024. This has been driven by mild weather, sufficient European gas storage and an influx of LNG to Europe.

Figure 3 – Movement in forward curve of wholesale gas cost



Source: Intercontinental Exchange



- 3.4 This fall in FES’s commodity costs is the largest driver of the forthcoming FES tariff decrease of 15.6%. As can be seen in Table 3, FES’s wholesale gas costs decreased from 198.47 p/therm in the current tariff to 117.70 p/therm in the 1 April 2024 tariff. It is important to note that an element of the gas price included within the maximum average price for the 1 April 2024 tariff is a forecast cost and the actual outturn prices may be higher or lower. This element is the cost of the gas that has not already been bought (hedged) to date.
- 3.5 In addition to the above, there have been increases in network costs for FES. These costs will also be recovered in the new 1 April 2024.

Table 3 – Wholesale Costs within Maximum Average Price

Elements within Maximum Average Price	October 2023 (p/therm)	April 2024 (p/therm)
Wholesale Gas Cost	198.47	117.70
(Over)/Under Recovery	7.97	31.69
Total Wholesale Gas Cost and Over/Under Recovery from Previous Tariff Periods	206.44	149.39

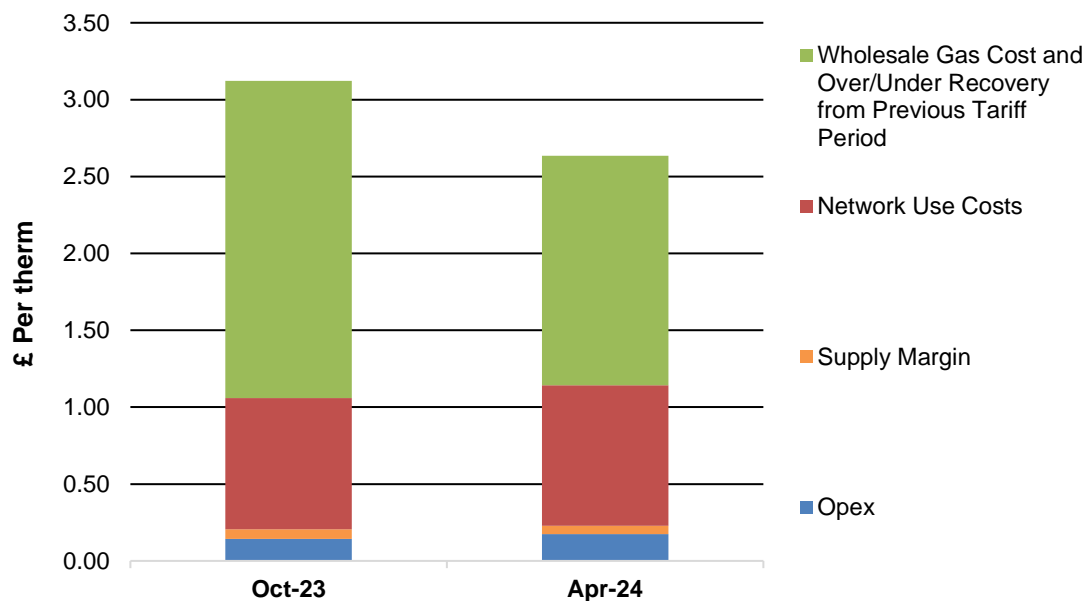
- 3.6 As shown in Table 3 above, the overall combined cost of wholesale gas and over/under recovery has decreased from 206.44 p/therm in the 1 October 2023 tariff to 149.39 p/therm in the 1 April 2024 tariff.



4. Breakdown of Maximum Average Price

4.1 The graph shown in Figure 4 below compares the breakdown of the April 2024 maximum average price with a breakdown of the previous maximum average price set in October 2023. As explained previously, the decrease in the maximum average price is due to the fall in the cost of wholesale gas.

Figure 4 – Breakdown of April 2024 maximum average price compared with previous maximum average price



Impact on Tariff

4.2 FES uses the maximum average price to set the actual tariffs charged to customers. The tariffs are calculated on a weighted average basis, based on average usage and the number of customers on each tariff. FES cannot charge more than the maximum average price

4.3 The new unit rates for regulated tariff customers are shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4 – FES’s tariff unit rates from 1 April 2024 (shown in p/kWh)

FES gas supply tariffs Ten Towns	Domestic Credit (inc. 5% VAT)	Domestic PAYG (inc. 5% VAT)	Small Business (excl. VAT)
Single Unit Rate p/kWh	9.589	9.383	9.402
Direct Debit discount	£22.00	-	-



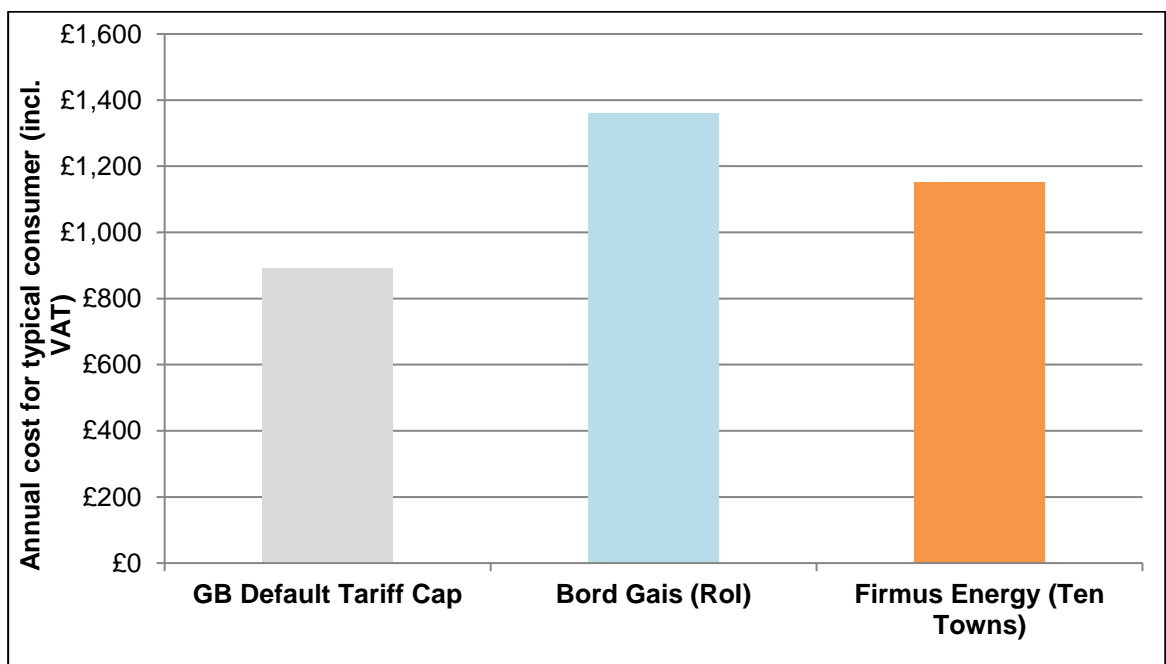
4.4 FES’s typical domestic credit (non-prepayment) bill will decrease to £1,151 per annum⁸ from 1 April 2024. This equates to a decrease of 15.6% or £213 per year compared with the existing tariff.

Comparison with GB and Ireland

4.5 Figure 5 below shows the typical FES domestic standard credit tariff from 1 April 2024, compared with Bord Gais⁹ in Ireland and the Default Tariff Cap¹⁰ level in GB. The average annual bill amounts in this graph have been calculated based on actual tariff unit rates (including VAT) and are based on average annual consumption of 12,000kWh.

4.6 Figure 5 illustrates that the FES tariff for an average domestic standard credit customer in the Ten Towns from 1 April 2024 will be 29.2% above the GB Gas Price Cap and 15.3% below the Bord Gais standard tariff in Ireland.

Figure 5 - Comparison of average annual domestic bills (based on standard domestic credit customers with estimated usage 12,000kWh per annum including VAT)



⁸ Based off a typical consumption of 12,000 kWh per annum. Including VAT. Excluding discounts.

⁹ [Our Tariffs & Prices | Bord Gáis Energy \(bordgaisenergy.ie\)](https://www.bordgaisenergy.ie)

¹⁰ [Default tariff cap level: 1 April 2024 to 30 June 2024](#) Average across all regions.



Conclusion

- 4.7 The UR has reviewed the maximum average price submission provided by FES and reviewed the forecasts against its own market analysis. The UR is satisfied that it is appropriate and justified to set a maximum average price of 263.58 p/therm for tariff customers in the Ten Towns for one year from 1 April 2024. This represents an average decrease of 15.6%.
- 4.8 The UR continues to retain the flexibility to initiate a review of gas prices at any stage if it is considered to be in the interest of customers.