



## *Action for Warm Homes*

Northern Ireland

**National Energy Action NI Response to  
Northern Ireland Housing Executive:**

***Inspiring Communities Shaping our  
Services Community Involvement  
Strategy 2018-2023***

October 2018



## About NEA

NEA is the national charity working to secure affordable warmth for disadvantaged energy consumers. NEA's strategic aims include influencing and increasing strategic action against fuel poverty; developing and progressing solutions to improve access to energy efficiency products, advice and fuel poverty related services in UK households and enhancing knowledge and understanding of energy efficiency and fuel poverty.

NEA seeks to meet these aims through a wide range of activities including policy analysis and development to inform our campaigning work, rational and constructive dialogue with decision-makers including regulatory and consumer protection bodies, relevant Government Departments, the energy industry, local and national government and develops practical initiatives to test and demonstrate the type of energy efficiency programmes required to deliver affordable warmth.

Based on the most recent House Condition Survey findings in 2016, Northern Ireland currently has a rate of fuel poverty at 22%. It is estimated that there are approximately 33,000 households in extreme fuel poverty spending over 25% of their total income to heat their homes. One in five households are living in relative poverty and 19% of working age adults in the private rented sector spend more than a third of their income on housing<sup>1</sup>.

The cold kills, and between August 2015 — July 2016 there were 640 excess winter deaths in Northern Ireland.

Additionally, and unique to Northern Ireland, 68% of all households are reliant on home heating oil, a non-regulated fuel which leaves us vulnerable to the vagaries of all this economic. Specifically, in relation to Brexit, the falling pound and the recent increase in wholesale costs all impacted on all fuels but the almost immediate impact on oil prices can be catastrophic and will put severe hardship on individuals and families. Recent increases have demonstrated that already, prices are rising steadily.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Poverty in Northern Ireland, 2018

## Fuel Poverty Overview

- Fuel Poverty is the nexus of 3 factors; low income, high energy price and energy inefficiency.
- Fuel Poverty has multiple consequences including mental and physical health impacts.
- 640<sup>2</sup> excess winter deaths occurred across Northern Ireland in 2015-2016 with 30% attributable to living in cold homes<sup>3</sup>.
- Improving the energy efficiency of the house is the most effective way of reducing fuel poverty, alongside maximising income and reducing the cost of energy to the householder.

The latest Northern Ireland Housing Executive House Condition Survey was released in May 2018 and provides an overview of the housing stock in Northern Ireland, as well as the latest fuel poverty statistics.

### Key findings:

- There are approximately 780,000 domestic dwellings in Northern Ireland.
- Owner Occupier is the largest tenure at 63% with the Private Rented sector and Social Housing sector at 17% and 16% respectively.
- **Fuel Poverty decreased to 22%, 160,000 households.**
- **The mean SAP rating improved from 59.63 in 2011 to 64.84.**
- 99% of dwellings had central heating.
- Oil remains the largest type of heating source at 68% of households.
- More than half (52%) of households living in old properties (Pre-1919) were living in fuel poverty.
- 55% of households living in fuel poverty had an annual income of less than £10,399.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/excess-winter-mortality-201516>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.euro.who.int/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0003/142077/e95004.pdf](http://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/142077/e95004.pdf)

## **Introduction**

NEA NI has worked closely with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) since our inception over two decades ago. We have undertaken many joint initiatives together including research and policy development. Most recently we trained 23 NIHE staff in our Level 3 City and Guilds energy awareness qualification and we commend the NIHE for their commitment to their people and the importance of energy awareness as a training need for frontline staff.

Householders living in fuel poverty and/or in need of energy advice can utilise a wide range of services provided by the NIHE including the HeatSmart Service, maintenance for tenants, the free energy efficiency advice service delivered in partnership with Bryson Energy and the area grants offices. Additional, NEA NI delivers the Northern Exposure project, funded by the Public Health Agency that engages directly with householders in greater Belfast and refer many householders to these services.

The role of public housing and the Housing Executive vision for Northern Ireland includes:

*“the right to a real choice of decent, accessible and affordable housing options including integrated housing in a diverse housing market”* we would firmly endorse this and we also believe that everyone should have the right to live a warm dry home.

In relation to the Key strategic objectives: *delivering better homes | supporting independent living | building stronger communities | delivering quality services* there is much synergy between these objectives and those in our own strategic plan.

## **Response**

We are pleased to respond to the Involvement Strategy and note many aspects which are pertinent to our work.

From the outset the Strategy recognises the importance of removing barriers around involvement from the hard to reach in communities. This is commendable given the many thousands of individuals and families who are struggling in various tenures. The range of fora spread throughout Northern Ireland will also provide a spatial tool for identifying those in need of a voice.

We are pleased to see the level of investment in community involvement activities and the Central Housing Forum channels feedback into such important initiatives including repairs and heating. We are also glad to see the phrase ‘future proofing’ within the strategy which is more relevant than ever to empower communities in the essential link they have with residents.

The proposed Leaseholder Panel is a welcome initiative given the often complicated processes after the sale of an NIHE flat. At NEA we have experienced examples of leaseholders with issues around installing heating and insulation and the obstacles associated with communal areas; so this is an important platform to raise adaptation issues and work towards a solution and good practice.

It is encouraging to see that the D4C project is now up and running providing much needed digital inclusion and connectivity particularly useful for residents who have not had previous access to this type of training and with particular barriers both physical and emotional. Similarly the Rural Residents Forum and Disability Forum identifying unmet need have undoubtedly played a part in the writing of the strategy. Digital inclusion is also useful for householders in relation to checking out the best energy deals and switching suppliers which can bring about downward pressure on energy bills.

Additionally, given the high level of people identified as having a physical or mental disability it is encouraging to see the work that the Disability Forum has achieved around issues in the housing context.

## **Recommendations**

As mentioned in our introduction, access to energy efficiency advice is available across all tenures mainly by telephone. We would certainly endorse more in depth engagement and training with the various housing fora in order to provide frontline community workers and householders with basic advice and tips in reducing energy consumption. NEA currently provides bespoke sessions for community organisations many of which are funded through an SLA with the NIHE. We have recently published our Fuel Poverty Action guide which provides tangible information and advice suitable for all tenures. It would be useful to reengage residents with the various energy services available and



while the NIHE already plays a particularly pro-active role in initiatives such as Energy Saving Week, we believe that more could be done with NEA to get the key messages out to local communities.

A sea-change in the delivery of home improvement grants saw many aspects of financial assistance moving from mandatory to discretionary and in 2009 funding efficiencies resulted in further restrictions in some renovation and home repair grants. It would be useful for a community based forum to take place on the general need for home improvements within the private and owner occupier sectors. Whilst the 2016 House Condition Survey has shown a vast decrease in unfit houses there are still many households living in homes that fail the decent homes standard. As outlined in the strategy document, there is an existing appetite from community representatives to focus on broader housing issues.

Finally, we look forward to seeing the progress and outcomes throughout the strategy timeline and rightly commend the NIHE and their stakeholders for the robust measurement tools which have put in place to drive progress.

**Response submitted by:**

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