

## 1. Electrical Safety First

- 1.1. Electrical Safety First is the UK charity committed to reducing deaths and injuries caused by electricity in the home. We work closely with Government, the electrical industry, manufacturers, retailers and consumer safety organisations to improve safety regulations and standards.
- 1.2. We also carry out research to identify attitudes and awareness around key issues and respond with targeted media and digital campaigns to share advice and guidance with consumers that will help them to stay safe in their homes.

## 2. Overview

- 2.1 Electrical Safety First welcomes the consultation on the Programme for Government (PfG) and the outcomes-based approach that the Executive is seeking to adopt. A focus on outcomes and delivering real, lasting positive changes in people's lives is welcome.
- 2.2 To provide an overarching context to our response, electricity causes nearly 60% of all house fires in Northern Ireland each year.<sup>1</sup> Our recent research also found that elderly and disabled people are disproportionately impacted by fires and accidents resulting from electricity in the home, and that tenants in Northern Ireland are not being afforded the same protections from electrical risks as their counterparts in other parts of the UK.<sup>2</sup>
- 2.3 In general, Electrical Safety First shares the disappointment of a range of housing stakeholders, including the Chartered Institute of Housing Northern Ireland (CIHNI), Housing Rights, the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Association (NIFHA), and the Council for the Homeless who are calling for a stand-alone housing outcome to be included in the PfG.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.electricalsafetyfirst.org.uk/what-we-do/our-policies/northern-ireland/statistics-northern-ireland/>  
<sup>2</sup> <https://www.electricalsafetyfirst.org.uk/what-we-do/our-policies/northern-ireland/research-northern-ireland/>



This would provide an opportunity to focus on the safety of housing, which is vitally important, particularly for the most vulnerable people in society.

2.4 Our consultation response considers the proposed objectives of the PfG and outlines opportunities to respond to a range of important electrical safety issues.

2.5 **In summary, the PfG should consider the following:**

- Mandatory five-yearly electrical safety protections for all renters, regardless of tenure.
- Financial assistance for vulnerable groups to improve electrical safety in their homes.
- Updating the Home Accident Prevention Strategy, with a particular focus on reducing electrical risks.
- Support for and promotion of the need to use registered electricians.
- A clear focus on the future challenges for electrical safety, from the decarbonisation of energy in housing to the mainstreaming of electric vehicles.

**3. Outcome: We have a caring society that supports people throughout their lives**

3.1. The Executive wants to ***“improve the quality of life for those with disabilities, empowering people to have more influence over their own lives”*** and also wants to ***“tailor support to enable older people to participate fully in society.”*** Electrical Safety First supports this objective and considers electrical safety an important consideration when it comes to ensuring that everyone can live independently and safely in their homes for as long as possible, which in turn will reduce pressures on health and social care services.

3.2. Our recent research found that elderly and disabled people in Northern Ireland are disproportionately impacted by fires and accidents resulting from electricity. For instance, between 2016-2019, 90% of all those who died in house fires were aged over 50. Additionally, of all fatal dwelling fires over a 15 year period, almost half (47%) involved people aged over 60.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.electricalsafetyfirst.org.uk/what-we-do/our-policies/northern-ireland/research-northern-ireland/>

- 3.3. There are a range of reasons for this, including mobility issues, living alone and/or in older properties with fewer safety features, issues with the safety of electrical appliances and a lack of access to appropriate guidance, support and advice. Set against a backdrop of an ageing population and a drive to encourage independent living wherever possible, concerns over electrical safety are likely to grow. Given that the elderly and disabled populations are disproportionately impacted by electrical safety risks, it is right that these groups should be a priority in the PfG.
- 3.4. The Executive should consider taking proactive steps to reduce domestic fires in the homes of the most vulnerable. This could include providing or subsidising the installation of Residual Current Devices (RCDs). An RCD is a life-saving device which is designed to prevent you from getting a fatal electric shock if you touch something live, such as a bare wire. A UK Government report estimates that 20% of electrical fires could be prevented by the presence of an RCD.<sup>4</sup>
- 3.5. Additionally, providing financial assistance for regular electrical safety checks for vulnerable households and updating the Home Accident Prevention Strategy to include specific measures to reduce electrical risks would both help to keep older and disabled people living independently and safely at home.

#### 4. Outcome: Live and work sustainably – protecting the environment

- 4.1. Electrical Safety First agrees that creating an environment that is sustainable should be a priority and welcomes the Executive's aim to ***“ensure our infrastructure is integrated, efficient and sustainable and people are encouraged to make environmentally responsible choices.”*** However, it is paramount that safety should be at the forefront of sustainability and is not forgotten as we transition to net zero.

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<sup>4</sup> DTI Report. Consumer Safety Research. Residual Current Devices - added value for home. 1997 safety. <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.dti.gov.uk/homesafetynetwork/pdf/rocd.pdf>

4.2. The electrification of heat and transport will be an important part of the decarbonisation agenda and will inevitably lead to changes in our homes. The increasing numbers of electrical appliances, such as electric boilers and heat pumps, combined with a shortage of trained installers and limited familiarity with new heating technologies will all impact on electrical safety. So too will the retrofitting of the existing housing stock.

4.3. We welcome the Executive's ambition to **'promote access to safe transport to encourage people to make environmentally responsible choices.'** An active and sustainable transport system will include Electric Vehicles (EVs). Our UK-wide research found that 74% of EV users admit they have charged dangerously due to an absence of local public charging points.<sup>5</sup> There will also be specific issues for residents of flats and renters, where the installation of charging points is likely to be more problematic.

4.4. However, the geographical size of Northern Ireland presents an opportunity for more rapid uptake of EVs because charging range anxiety may be less of a concern for consumers. This reinforces the need for a focus on these important issues in the next PfG.

## 5. Outcome: People want to live, work and visit here

5.1. Electrical Safety First welcomes the Executive's aim to **"ensure everyone has access to good-quality, affordable housing ... promoting an integrated, shared society"** and **"creating and shaping high quality, sustainable places for people to live."**

5.2. As part of this, Electrical Safety First believes that safety of domestic dwellings should be an important consideration and that tenants deserve equal protections – regardless of whether they are living in the social or private rented sectors.

5.3. Private tenants in Scotland and England are protected with mandatory five-yearly electrical safety checks, and Wales has committed to do the same. In Scotland, social tenants also benefit from five-yearly electrical safety checks. Tenants in Northern Ireland deserve the same

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.electricalsafetyfirst.org.uk/media-centre/press-releases/2019/05/driven-to-danger-electric-vehicle-drivers-charging-dangerously-due-to-lack-of-public-infrastructure/#:~:text=Electrical Safety First's advice for EV owners: Never,as a reel cable. Never 'daisy-chain' extension leads.>

safeguards. It is positive, therefore, that the Housing Executive undertakes five-yearly electrical checks on its properties, and when there is a turnover of tenant, but it is unclear whether housing associations follow this same best practice approach.

5.4. To provide all tenants with equal protections, the PfG should include a commitment to mandate five-yearly electrical safety checks across all rental properties in Northern Ireland. This will **ensure that everyone has access to good-quality housing** that, importantly, is safe.

5.5. Electrical Safety First agrees that housing and planning are key priority areas under this outcome. However, we support the call by the sector that there should be a stand-alone housing outcome in the PfG. More widely, we believe the Housing Fitness Standard should be updated to enhance electrical safety across all housing tenures. The Executive should look to adopt the Healthy Home Rating System (HHRs) model, which examines a property for various safety hazards, including electrical faults.

5.6. Additionally, the Landlord Registration Regulations should be updated to include a “fitness for habitation declaration” at the point of registration. This is particularly important given that the Executive recognises that ‘**health and wellbeing are directly affected by the quality of the environment around us.**’