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## **COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION**

**of 30.4.2026**

**on the protection of vulnerable customers and customers in energy poverty from energy disconnections and during planning and carrying out of the phase-out of natural gas or when natural gas distribution networks are being decommissioned**

{SWD(2026) 126 final}

# COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION

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## **on the protection of vulnerable customers and customers in energy poverty from energy disconnections and during planning and carrying out of the phase-out of natural gas or when natural gas distribution networks are being decommissioned**

THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION,

Having regard to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, and in particular Article 292 thereof,

Whereas:

- (1) Energy disconnection occurs when a household is cut off from essential energy services such as electricity or gas supply. It is often the result of non-payment of bills, which can be attributed to a combination of factors closely linked to energy poverty, including low income, high energy costs, and inadequate access to energy efficiency solutions and financing.
- (2) Protection against and prohibition of energy disconnections during critical times was first introduced in 2009 and was strengthened by Directive (EU) 2019/944<sup>1</sup> and further reinforced by Directive (EU) 2024/1711<sup>2</sup> and Directive (EU) 2024/1788<sup>3</sup>, with the objective of ensuring that all consumers have access to essential energy services, with new provisions and suppliers' obligations on consumer rights and protection.
- (3) Access to housing and essential energy services is a precondition for the right to a decent standard of living, as recognised by Principles 19 and 20 of the European Pillar of Social Rights and by the European Affordable Housing Plan<sup>4</sup>. Ensuring protection from disconnection therefore contributes directly to the Union's social objectives and the full implementation of this principle.
- (4) As highlighted by the Communication on the action plan for affordable energy<sup>5</sup>, high energy costs are limiting the ability of an increasing number of Europeans to pay their energy bills. This includes vulnerable customers, who spend a disproportionately higher share of their income on energy, and many middle-income people.

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<sup>1</sup> Directive (EU) 2019/944 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 June 2019 on common rules for the internal market for electricity and amending Directive 2012/27/EU, *OJ L 158*, 14.6.2019, *ELI*: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2019/944/oj>.

<sup>2</sup> Directive (EU) 2024/1711 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 amending Directives (EU) 2018/2001 and (EU) 2019/944 as regards improving the Union's electricity market design, *OJ L*, 2024/1711, 26.6.2024, *ELI*: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2024/1711/oj>.

<sup>3</sup> Directive (EU) 2024/1788 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 on common rules for the internal markets for renewable gas, natural gas and hydrogen, amending Directive (EU) 2023/1791 and repealing Directive 2009/73/EC, *OJ L*, 2024/1788, 15.7.2024, *ELI*: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2024/1788/oj>.

<sup>4</sup> *The European Affordable Housing Plan - Housing - European Commission, COM(2025) 1025 final, 16.12.2025.*

<sup>5</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic And Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions Action Plan for Affordable Energy Unlocking the true value of our Energy Union to secure affordable, efficient and clean energy for all Europeans, COM/2025/79 final.

- (5) This recommendation covers ‘energy poverty’ as defined in Article 2, point 52 of Directive (EU) 2023/1791<sup>6</sup> and ‘vulnerable customers’ as referred to in Article 28 of Directive (EU) 2019/944<sup>7</sup> and Article 26 of Directive (EU) 2024/1788<sup>8</sup>. The Commission has published two recommendations<sup>9</sup> on energy poverty, which also concern vulnerable customers.
- (6) Article 10(11) of Directive (EU) 2019/944 and Article 11(10) of Directive (EU) 2024/1788 require Member States to ensure that energy suppliers provide household customers with adequate information on alternative measures to disconnection sufficiently in advance of any planned disconnection. Such alternative measures may refer to sources of support to avoid disconnection, prepayment systems, energy audits, energy consultancy services, alternative payment plans, debt management advice or disconnection moratoria and not constitute an extra cost to the customers facing disconnection. Effective practices are already implemented across the Union and can be replicated and scaled up to protect the most vulnerable customers – that, if using a prepayment meter, could feel compelled to choose to self-disconnect – and ensure continued access to energy.
- (7) The timely transposition of EU provisions on vulnerable customers and energy poverty, particularly Article 28a of Directive (EU) 2019/944 and Article 28 of the Directive (EU) 2024/1788, is essential to ensure a comprehensive approach to protecting vulnerable households from energy disconnections through coordinated and collaborative governance on multiple levels and with multiple stakeholders and sharing of best practice among all concerned actors.
- (8) Accurate identification of vulnerable customers and people in energy poverty is key to designing effective support measures. Regular reviews and updates of relevant data are necessary to assess if beneficiaries should receive continued support or if their individual situation has improved, and to direct targeted assistance at those in need in a timely manner.
- (9) Addressing the root causes of energy poverty, protecting vulnerable customers and preventing disconnections requires prioritising structural, long-term measures through Union and national funding. Such measures include energy efficiency, access to renewables, energy self-production and consumption, energy sharing, energy communities, alongside the promotion of smart meters and real-time energy monitoring.
- (10) Easily accessible information and guidance, targeted training, simple tools and proactive engagement before disconnection are essential to empower and protect

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<sup>6</sup> Directive (EU) 2023/1791 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 September 2023 on energy efficiency and amending Regulation (EU) 2023/955, *OJ L 231, 20.9.2023*, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2023/1791/oj>.

<sup>7</sup> Directive (EU) 2019/944 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 June 2019 on common rules for the internal market for electricity and amending Directive 2012/27/EU, *OJ L 158, 14.6.2019*, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2019/944/2025-10-12>.

<sup>8</sup> Directive (EU) 2024/1788 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 on common rules for the internal markets for renewable gas, natural gas and hydrogen, amending Directive (EU) 2023/1791 and repealing Directive 2009/73/EC, *OJ L, 2024/1788, 15.7.2024*, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2024/1788/oj>.

<sup>9</sup> Commission Recommendation (EU) 2020/1563 of 14 October 2020 on energy poverty, *OJ L 357, 27.10.2020*, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reco/2020/1563/oj>; Commission Recommendation (EU) 2023/2407 of 20 October 2023 on energy poverty, *OJ L, 2023/2407, 23.10.2023*, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reco/2023/2407/oj>.

vulnerable customers and customers in energy poverty. This will improve awareness and trust in suppliers.

- (11) Digital accessible tools, including remotely readable consumption data, smart meters, and supplier-customer interaction tools, make it possible to detect early signs of payment difficulty. Predictable financing of transparent advisory tools and assistance instruments such as one-stop shops that provide integrated energy renovation services, as set out in Directive (EU) 2024/1275<sup>10</sup> on the energy performance of buildings, is essential to address the individual needs of vulnerable households.
- (12) Under certain specific circumstances and when clearly targeted to vulnerable households, direct targeted public support (e.g. subsidies, energy vouchers, targeted support programmes) is an important measure to help vulnerable customers manage their energy bills and prevent energy disconnections, in complementarity with structural and long-lasting measures.
- (13) To protect customers against energy disconnections, legislative measures can include seasonal disconnection bans, assistance for customers struggling with energy bills, and safeguards to avoid the negative consequences of prepayment systems, such as installation and maintenance costs and ensuring that tariffs for users of prepaid meters are not higher than for other energy customers.
- (14) Article 27a of (EU) Directive 2019/944, introduced by Directive (EU) 2024/1711, requires Member States to introduce a regime with regard to suppliers of last resort. Article 29 of Directive (EU) 2024/1788 requires Member States to introduce a regime with regard to suppliers of last resort or to take equivalent measures to ensure continuity of supply at least for household customers. The aforementioned provisions also require Member States to ensure that, in case a final customer is transferred to a supplier of last resort, such a supplier communicates its terms and conditions and ensures seamless continuity of service for those customers for a period needed to find a new supplier.
- (15) Energy suppliers have a crucial role to play in protecting vulnerable customers and preventing energy disconnections. The adoption of understandable, easy, step-by-step disconnection procedures addressing the needs and situations of these customers is essential. Voluntary engagement codes involving suppliers, consumer associations, and distribution system operators can help prevent energy disconnections, promote fair and transparent treatment of customers and provide access to clear information and support.
- (16) To understand the features and scope of the situation of disconnected or of customers at risk of disconnection, it is key to monitor disconnection processes, rates, causes and impacts, as well as complaints by household customers. This includes reviewing the notice periods set by energy suppliers, assessing the availability and accessibility of payment plans and the level of support offered to vulnerable customers. National regulatory authorities play an important role in gathering and providing pertinent information pursuant to Article 59(1) point (o) of Directive (EU) 2019/944 and are thereby instrumental in ensuring that all customers are adequately protected and supported through effective measures.
- (17) As regards the protection of vulnerable customers and customers affected by energy poverty during the planning and carrying out of the phase-out of natural gas or when

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<sup>10</sup> Directive (EU) 2024/1275 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 April 2024 on the energy performance of buildings, *OJL*, 2024/1275, 8.5.2024, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2024/1275/oj> .

natural gas distribution networks are being decommissioned, article 27 of Directive (EU) 2024/1788 requires the Commission to provide guidance to Member States.

- (18) Recent energy price volatility following Russia's war against Ukraine, and the subsequent shift towards more expensive liquefied natural gas imports make clear the need to accelerate the transition towards affordable, locally produced clean energy.
- (19) Several Member States have already launched national or regional natural gas-phase-out strategies, recognising that this transition will be a gradual and long-term process.
- (20) To ensure energy security and affordability, customers need to be empowered to switch from natural gas to cleaner, electricity-based alternatives. While renewable gases may have a role in certain areas, large parts of the existing gas distribution network are expected to become obsolete. This will require managed decommissioning and strategic investment planning to avoid stranded assets.
- (21) Protecting vulnerable households and ensuring affordable and inclusive access to clean energy should be a guiding principle of natural gas phase-out processes. This is crucial to ensure a smooth transition to cleaner energy alternatives for most customers in energy poverty and to prevent the risks of rising tariffs disproportionately affecting them and further exposing them to energy poverty.
- (22) Effective coordination between national, regional and local authorities, gas operators, and other relevant operators in the electricity and heating and cooling sectors, as well as social partners, consumer organisations, civil society and local stakeholders, is necessary to ensure a common, cross-sectoral and integrated system planning approach to the natural gas phase-out, based on shared scenarios for the evolution of energy supply and demand across all energy sectors and developed with the involvement of all relevant stakeholders. Such coordination would support consistent planning and implementation, including for the availability of adequate resources and access to finance for local authorities as key enablers, as well as the development of flexible and transparent long-term network strategies.
- (23) Poorly prepared, communicated or implemented natural gas phase-out processes risk creating social resistance and mistrust in the benefits of electrification and energy independence. Member States should therefore place people at the centre and base their work on the common principles of consumer protection, transparency, fairness, accessibility, affordability and participation by the public.
- (24) Member States differ in their reliance on natural gas, in the characteristics of their building stock, in how they are implementing the phasing-out of fossil fuel boilers pursuant to Article 17(15) of the Directive (EU) 2024/1275 and in their capacity to support vulnerable households. They have to set out in their National Building Renovation Plans the policies and measures to achieve this phase-out in 2040. National pathways will reflect the specific national and local circumstances while adhering to said common principles.
- (25) Funding instruments available at Union level can be used to support the fair and inclusive implementation of the natural gas phase-out, such as the European Regional Development Fund, the Cohesion Fund and the Just Transition Fund, in line with the principles of complementarity and administrative simplification.

- (26) To respond to the objectives of the affordable energy action plan and the Commission's commitment to better regulation, implementation and simplification<sup>11</sup> and policy coherence, this Recommendation aims to streamline implementation at national and local level by providing clear and practical guidance, avoiding unnecessary administrative burden and ensuring that measures are accessible and easy to understand for individuals and authorities alike.
- (27) In accordance with the European Pillar of Social Rights and the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, Member States should ensure that the design and implementation of natural gas phase-out measures promote gender equality and non-discrimination, as well as disability rights.

HAS ADOPTED THIS RECOMMENDATION:

It is recommended that Member States take the following measures:

### **Protection of vulnerable customers and customers in energy poverty from energy disconnections:**

#### **I. Transposition, Definition and Identification**

1. **Ensure full, consistent and timely transposition as soon as possible** of all EU provisions on vulnerable customers and customers in energy poverty, in particular Articles 28 and 28a of Directive (EU) 2019/944 and Article 28 of Directive (EU) 2024/1788, guaranteeing an equivalent level of protection in both the electricity and gas sectors. Member States should ensure consistency across energy markets and that no consumer loses access to essential energy services because of sectoral regulatory differences.
2. **Base eligibility for support** to vulnerable customers and those in energy poverty on clear, objective, reliable and timely data reflecting multiple dimensions of vulnerability. Socio-economic, energy, climate, building, health and thermal comfort data should be integrated in the eligibility assessment and complemented by disaggregated sources (e.g. smart meters or sensors) and local institutional data. This allows to develop eligibility criteria that ensure a holistic approach, capturing the full picture of a household's situation. Where appropriate, Member States should employ automatic eligibility mechanisms through data-sharing between relevant authorities to reduce administrative burden and stigma. Complementary self-identification processes should remain simple and accessible through multiple channels (online, telephone, postal or in-person).
3. **Review and update eligibility** criteria and support schemes frequently to ensure they remain well-targeted and effective and prevent any abuse of process. Data should be updated regularly to capture changes in income, household composition, health or employment status, as well as in the rest of the data referred to in Recommendation 2.

#### **II. Prevention of Disconnections**

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<sup>11</sup> A simpler and faster Europe: Communication on implementation and simplification, COM/2025/47 final.

4. **Prioritise structural, long-term measures** such as energy-efficiency improvements, renewable-energy uptake, energy self-consumption, energy sharing and participation in energy communities, supported by smart meters and real-time monitoring. Where necessary, complement such measures with targeted and temporary direct public support – including targeted financial assistance – to help vulnerable customers manage energy bills and avoid disconnection.
5. **Enhance consumer information and awareness** by providing clear guidance and training on rights and obligations, energy literacy, billing, supplier switching and hardship support, as well as by improving the take-up and awareness of existing benefits. Member States should ensure adequate funding for one-stop shops and advisory services that assist low-income and energy-poor households, in line with Union guidance on integrated renovation services<sup>12</sup>.
6. **Introduce early-warning mechanisms to detect vulnerabilities:** Member States should encourage suppliers and distribution system operators to establish systems for early identification of household customers at risk of non-payment, based on consumption anomalies or arrears. Such systems should trigger preventive and supportive contact, energy advice or referral to social assistance before any formal disconnection notice is issued.

### **III. Protection against disconnections**

7. **Adopt appropriate legislative safeguards**, including:
  - (a) seasonal disconnection bans and medically justified exemptions, defined according to national climatic and social conditions, and year-round disconnection ban for customers with health reasons entailing critical dependence on electrically powered medical equipment;
  - (b) tailored assistance for customers in or at risk of arrears, including payment plans, debt-management support and, where justified, debt relief, as well as measures to limit or waive disconnection and reconnection fees;
  - (c) rules ensuring that disconnection is not carried out where a bill is formally disputed and unresolved, where a payment plan is being negotiated, or where the customer complies with an agreed payment plan, within the limit of parties' contractual rights and obligations being fully respected; and
  - (d) rules ensuring that prepayment systems do not impose higher tariffs or hidden costs and that outstanding debts are recovered through proportionate and fair procedures.
8. **Ensure effective supplier of last resort regimes guaranteeing continuity of supply**, limited to temporary use, with automatic and immediate transition to prevent service disruption, and transparent communication and information provided to customers to ensure that they are not placed on expensive default rates and have access to the necessary tools and resources to make informed decisions about their energy supply.
9. **Promote responsible supplier practices** by encouraging the adoption of clear, step-by-step disconnection procedures, reasonable notice periods, and – where technically

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<sup>12</sup> COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION (EU) 2026/536 of 10 March 2026 with practical guidance on one-stop shops services for energy efficiency and the energy performance of buildings, *OJ L 536, 11.03.2026*, *ELI*: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reco/2026/536/oj>.

feasible – a period of adjusted minimum electricity supply sufficient to cover basic needs. Member States should also ensure that suppliers provide tailored advice on energy bill assistance and the best-suited offers, with clear communication in multiple languages and channels.

10. **Encourage voluntary engagement codes** between suppliers, consumer associations and distribution system operators to promote fairness, transparency and cooperation in preventing disconnections.

#### **IV. Governance, monitoring and evaluation**

11. **Ensure coordinated, multi-level governance** involving national and local authorities, social support services, suppliers, ombuds services and consumer organisations to share best practices and coordinate interventions.
12. **Mandate regulatory authorities** to monitor and report on disconnection rates, analyse complaints, and assess the adequacy of supplier notice periods and payment-plan options.
13. **Develop comprehensive indicators and data-collection systems** covering both disconnections and self-disconnections, disaggregated by household characteristics and socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity and health to identify gaps, evaluate the effectiveness of measures and guide corrective actions.
14. **Consider extending prevention and protection measures against energy disconnections** where appropriate, so that these apply not only to households at risk but also to a broader category of consumers who may face energy affordability challenges, such as low-income households at risk of arrears or facing sudden income shocks.
15. **Mobilise Union and national funding:** Member States should make full use of the different funding opportunities, including the Social Climate Fund, to finance preventive and protective measures against energy disconnections, including structural measures, targeted support, digital tools for early intervention, and training for social workers and consumers.

#### **Ensuring protection of vulnerable customers and customers affected by energy poverty during planning and carrying out of the phase-out of natural gas or when natural gas distribution networks are being decommissioned**

##### **I. Establish enabling legal and policy frameworks for a smooth and fair natural gas phase-out**

16. Ensure the full, consistent and timely transposition and application of the provisions of Articles 13, 55 and 57 of Directive (EU) 2024/1788 in a coordinated manner and ensure consistency between national energy and climate plans, national building renovation plans and heating and cooling strategies, with a view to enabling the coherent, efficient and fair development of electricity, heat and gas networks across all levels of governance.

17. Design natural gas phase out strategies and policies with the benefits they will bring to consumers and society in mind and with a view to optimising the customer journey of the households concerned.
18. Prioritise energy savings, building renovation, and clean heating solutions as efficient measures to protect vulnerable customers and customers in energy poverty from energy price volatility and fossil fuel costs, including carbon pricing.
19. Establish comprehensive planning and coordination between national, regional and local administrations and engage all relevant stakeholders, including energy operators, national regulatory authorities, consumer organisations social partners, civil society and residents in all phases of the natural gas phase-out process. Where such structures exist, local or regional energy agencies or similar bodies may support this process, in line with the roles attributed to them at national, regional or local level.
20. Give all relevant actors sufficient lead time for planning and implementation of a natural gas phase-out, ideally at least 10 years, especially in heavily natural gas-dependent regions. Member States should prioritise reducing demand of natural gas through energy efficiency, promoting electrification and the uptake of clean technologies, voluntary disconnections, and bans on new gas connections, while making clean alternatives more attractive, including through taxation, phasing out fossil fuel subsidies and targeted incentives for switching to alternative technologies.
21. Support both individual solutions (such as heat pumps and solar thermal) and collective systems (such as efficient district heating and cooling, shared geothermal or waste-heat projects) with a focus on affordability for low-income households and regions.
22. Empower municipalities to become the primary enablers of natural gas phase-out processes locally. Where relevant, use the local heating and cooling plans required by Article 25.6 of Directive (EU)2023/1791 for municipalities with over 45 000 inhabitants as an operational framework for identifying alternatives and supporting local communities.
23. Provide targeted technical and administrative support, especially to small and medium-sized municipalities to overcome administrative and financial limitations to plan and implement natural gas phase-out processes. This support should include training, pooled technical assistance and access to EU support programmes.
24. Promote energy communities and energy-sharing initiatives by establishing clear, simple rules, lowering administrative costs and burden, offering financial incentives and access to technology, and ensuring social inclusiveness in participation and benefit-sharing.
25. Address the split incentive problem in rented homes by aligning landlord and tenant interests through regulatory measures, targeted financing tools and incentives for renovation.
26. Remove barriers to building renovation in multi-apartment buildings by simplifying access to financing and decision-making for co-ownership structures. Encourage bundled or district level renovations to achieve economies of scale and improve affordability and comfort.

27. Ensure consistency between the definitions of ‘vulnerable customers’ and ‘energy poverty’ across the gas and electricity sectors, reflecting Member States’ national social and housing policies.
28. Ensure that vulnerable and energy-poor customers who will still be connected to the gas network are protected from excessive tariff increases. To this end, ensure that NRAs are empowered to establish guidelines for a structural approach to the depreciation of assets that are decommissioned before their originally projected life cycle, and tariff setting.

## **II. Enhance consumer engagement and empowerment**

29. Ensure early, transparent and inclusive communication with households in the context of the natural gas phase-out. Communication and engagement strategies should be tailored to different social and income groups, in particular vulnerable and energy-poor customers.
30. Announce local and regional phase-out decisions at least 10 years in advance, providing a predictable roadmap of key milestones such as new-connection bans, subsidy phase-outs and network decommissioning.
31. Provide households with clear and accessible information on the reasons, timelines, rights and obligations, support measures and benefits of the transition, such as lower energy bills, healthier and more comfortable homes, greater energy security and climate change mitigation.
32. Ensure that households are informed about all viable energy alternatives, including the potential role of renewable gases, collective heat solutions and electrification pathways, and about the benefits of energy efficiency.
33. Strengthen one-stop shops defined in Directives (EU) 2023/1791 and (EU) 2024/1275 so that they can act as central contact points for households to provide specific expertise and targeted support related to the phasing out of natural gas, including financing support available and clean heating and cooking options.
34. Design natural gas phase-out strategies that combine energy-efficiency improvements with the deployment of clean technologies. Member States should also prioritise support for vulnerable and low-income households through grants, beyond-grant approaches, smart-financing, low-interest loans and variable targeted support schemes for clean technologies linked to income or social indicators, ensuring fairness and social equity.

## **III. Follow-up**

35. Report progress on the preparation and implementation of national, regional and/or local natural gas phase-out plans and the follow-up to this Recommendation through the updates of the national climate and energy plans - as part of Member States’ comprehensive assessment of heating and cooling plans and national building renovation strategies included therein, and building on local heating and cooling plans.
36. Share best practices and data on social impacts, affordability and consumer protection through the Union supported initiatives Energy Poverty Advisory Hub (EPAH) and the Covenant of Mayors.

37. Make use of existing Union platforms such as the EPAH and the emerging Common European Energy Data Space to support monitoring, ensure transparency, and share comparable data on social and energy impacts.
38. Cooperate with the Commission, regulatory authorities and civil-society stakeholders to ensure a consistent, fair and inclusive approach across the Union.

Done at Brussels, 30.4.2026

*For the Commission*  
*Dan JØRGENSEN*  
*Member of the Commission*

