

APPENDIX TO EIGHTH PROGRESS REPORT (2003-04) FOR THE HOME ENERGY CONSERVATION ACT 1995 (HECA)

FUEL POVERTY PROGRESS REPORT

1. INTRODUCTION

Fuel poverty arises as a result of several causal factors, including low income, inadequate insulation, ineffective/inefficient heating systems, size of property and price and method of payment for fuel. These factors often come about as a result in a change in the circumstances of the household, e.g. loss/change of employment, loss of a partner through death or separation, or change in health leading to an increased requirement for heating. Warm, safe housing has a major role to play in maximising the well being of people, helping to maintain the elderly in their own homes, reducing the incidence of cold and damp related illnesses and maintaining the condition of the housing stock.

The common definition of a household in fuel poverty is one that needs to spend in excess of 10% of household income in order to maintain a satisfactory heating regime.

Nationally, around 30% of UK households are estimated to be suffering from fuel poverty. The English House Condition Survey 1996 Energy Report estimates that in the Eastern Region approximately 16% of the households are in fuel poverty.

2. PROGRESS AND DEVELOPMENT

During the year Huntingdonshire District Council's Energy Efficiency Team has been active in promoting the Warm Front Scheme through a variety of media; local press, community news letters, local fairs, environment fairs, energy roadshows and advertisements on local radio to ensure that the scheme was widely publicised in the District.

The team have also worked in partnership with the Powergen Warm Front staff on several projects, including jointly advertising the availability of the grant as part of a 'Winter Warmth' feature in the local press and more significantly jointly funding a mail shot to all the recipients of Council tax and/or Housing benefit in the district. The mail shot produced a major rise in the number of residents applying for the Warm Front grant.

Advice on eligibility for Warm Front grants is provided by the Energy Efficiency Team and by staff in Housing Services and the Home Improvement Agency, who work with the most vulnerable people in our community. In this way the delivery of energy advice has been combined with advice on repairs and adaptations to homes. In the past this was done largely through Home Repair Assistance, Renovation and Disabled Facility grants but now, under the changes introduced by the Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) Order, help will be provided largely through the Council's new Repairs Assistance loans and grants.

There are links and cross referrals between all these teams in order to ensure that a comprehensive package of measures is available to vulnerable households. Under the Repairs Assistance policy, the Council will continue its previous practice of, in approved cases, topping up any shortfall between the

Warm Front grant and the cost of the work. A good working relationship has also been developed with the Powergen Warm Front Team, the scheme managers and their local referral advisors to ensure that any problems can be resolved promptly and other potential avenues of grant aid can be identified for the households concerned. In the Eastern region, a working group of HECA officers has been established to advise the Powergen Warm Front Team managers on how they may resolve problems, improve communications and discuss issues of mutual interest within the referral network. The specific aim of this partnership working with Powergen Warm Front, the Home Improvement Agency and voluntary groups is to help maintain vulnerable people in their own homes.

The Energy Efficiency Team have worked with a number of voluntary agencies and groups in order to promote affordable warmth to specific groups. Existing links with the Blind Society have been maintained and new links have been established with community safety officers in local police stations in the District. As a result the team will be able to promote affordable warmth principles through participation in large-scale promotions organised by the police in their 'Stop, Chain, Check – Closing the door on bogus callers' scheme. These promotions allowed us to promote genuine grants, give advice on mis-selling with regards to fuel swap door-step sales personnel and to give generalised energy efficiency advice and distribute CFL's. Groups such as Darby and Joan type clubs are also used to provide energy efficiency and grant advice to a wide audience. The Energy Team also advise on the help the fuel companies can provide, e.g. free gas safety checks, large print bills, security passwords and consumer advice through Energywatch. Through these agencies and groups team members have visited individual households to help improve their understanding of heating controls and no cost/low cost measures of fuel saving. The team aim to continue to develop and strengthen links with the key partners identified in our original fuel poverty report and to be alert to other opportunities.

Successful partnership working has been established with London Electricity, Powergen and British Gas and their affiliated contractors to promote their Energy Efficiency Commitment Schemes, which provide reduced cost insulation measures to owner-occupier and private rented households. The team has achieved success in targeting these measures at households vulnerable to fuel poverty due to low incomes where the occupants are over 60 but not in receipt of benefits and therefore not eligible under the Warm Front scheme.

Recently that Council has developed a partnership with Enact Energy Management to further promote energy efficiency in the District. Over the course of the next 12 months each household will receive a leaflet in the post promoting discounts on cavity wall insulation and loft insulation to home owners and tenants of private landlords. Those households who respond to the promotion and who receive the relevant benefits will be forwarded on to the Warm Front scheme. This type of mail shot has the advantage of reaching many of those households, which are difficult to reach using other promotional methods. It is hoped that the discounts negotiated for the scheme will encourage many of those at risk of fuel poverty, but who do not receive benefits, to improve the energy efficiency of their homes.

The health implications of fuel poverty, its impact on asthma, excess winter mortality and morbidity and the exacerbation of cardiac and respiratory disease continues to be well researched and documented. The Energy Efficiency Team participate in a multi-agency county-wide group established

under the Health Improvement Plan (HImP) in order to raise the awareness of frontline health personnel on the impact of fuel poverty, identification of the problem within the home and the assistance that is available to help alleviate this. The Affordable Warmth Task Team wrote the chapter that appeared in the HImP document for Cambridgeshire (2000/2001) and has subsequently been involved in the revision of this chapter with the Huntingdonshire Primary Care Trust for the new Huntingdonshire HImP document. The Affordable Warmth group is part of the HImP Public Health and Health Inequalities Advisory Group, which advises the Director of Public Health on HImP strategy. Subsequent to the changes in the structure of the Health Authority and the establishment of the Huntingdonshire PCT the group is now working in consultation with the Health Promotion specialists on developing new ways of identifying and helping vulnerable households in our community. While the focus of health care delivery has been shifted to local PCT's, those members of the countywide Affordable Warmth Task Team continue to exchange ideas and best practice and to ensure some continuity where the boundaries of the local district councils and new PCTs do not converge. As part of the ongoing partnership development we have written to all practice managers offering advice packs, posters and articles for their newsletters. Officers from the district have also taken part in workshops called 'Healthy Homes-Healthy Ageing' which were aimed at health professionals across Cambridgeshire to promote and share ideas for partnership working of nursing services, council services and voluntary groups to help maintain the health of our elderly population. The impact of cold home and fuel poverty was discussed and further discussions will continue at future workshops.

Working in collaboration with Age Concern and other local authority partners we have developed and launched our 'Warmometers'. These are card, room thermometers designed to provide positive advice for managing energy use in the home, particularly of the elderly and vulnerable, without emphasising the more disturbing effects that cold can have on health.

We recognise the importance of rural fuel poverty, particularly in areas not connected to mains gas. One of our ongoing projects includes producing articles for parish magazines giving advice on grants and measures. We have had an excellent response from the parish councils who have provided details of the publications in their areas, allowing us to contact parts of the community isolated from the promotional activities in the larger market towns.

Nationally, it is recognised that a large percentage of those in fuel poverty live in the private rented sector. This housing sector is also considered one of the hardest to tackle with regard to fuel poverty and affordable warmth. A Small Landlords' Forum has been developed by Housing Services and the Energy Efficiency Team contribute to this forum which has the following objectives:

- To forge links between the Council and private housing providers so that each party can develop a better understanding of how the other operates.
- To provide a formal channel for the Council to consult private landlords.
- To provide a venue for seminars, presentations and discussions on topics of interest to landlords such as grants, energy efficiency, fuel poverty, tenancy law and taxation.
- To encourage landlords who are already providing and managing to a high standard to continue to do so, and to encourage others to raise standards.
- To encourage landlords to continue to consider accommodating low-income households.

Links with local housing associations have been strengthened and the Energy Efficiency Team have worked with them on specific energy efficiency/affordable warmth projects such as articles in tenant newsletters. Arrangements are in hand to help Huntingdonshire Housing Partnership (HHP) process energy data collected as part of their stock condition survey and in the interim have provided HHP with energy surveys on specific properties. This data will enable them to identify those properties most urgently in need of improvements required to achieve the new housing standards for thermal efficiency, ensuring continued improvement in the SAP ratings for their properties. The additional information will also be of benefit to the Council in reporting HECA improvements.

National Energy Action (NEA) continues to work with the Council in a number of areas. They provided support and expertise for an Affordable Warmth Seminar, Energy Efficiency Team members have attended their national conference and participate in the Eastern Region fuel poverty forum. As part of this group they have contributed to the dissemination of ideas and best practice by discussing experience of Warm Front and affordable warmth projects within the Health Authority and HImP

3. CONCLUSIONS

- The objectives, set out in the Fuel Poverty Report 2000, continue to be relevant and reflect the objectives set out in the Government's Fuel Poverty Strategy published in November 2001
- Advice and promotions of the grants available will continue to be targeted at the private housing sector to reach the most vulnerable groups and help maintain the housing stock. Work with the local health authority and voluntary groups will continue to be developed to reach the widest possible audience of those vulnerable to fuel poverty.
- Links with local housing associations will be further developed in order to help them to profile their stock, identify energy efficiency improvements and help them to provide advice to their tenants on energy efficiency and fuel poverty.
- Work with Council colleagues and Members of the Council will be continued to promote and improve knowledge and awareness of the issues surrounding fuel poverty.