



*Ymgyrchu Dros Gartrefi Clyd
Campaigning for Warm Homes*

South and North Wales Fuel Poverty Forums

Report Back
November 2007

NEA Cymru

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Fuel Poverty Forums

NEA Cymru hosts Fuel Poverty Forums in North and South Wales. The meetings are aimed at strategic policy makers, service providers, and community groups, as well as interested individuals who want to eradicate fuel poverty in their communities.

Key aims of the forum:

- ✍️ to provide a space to network and share experiences;
- ✍️ to raise awareness about fuel poverty and inform others of the work being done;
- ✍️ to help inform and influence policy decision-making processes;
- ✍️ to set example and demonstrate that tackling fuel poverty benefits from the active participation of everyone.

Expected outcomes:

- ✍️ examine policy and practical initiatives related to fuel poverty and delivering energy efficiency solutions at a local, regional and national level;
- ✍️ showcase innovative provision and best practice
- ✍️ promote dialogue and discussion on a wide range of sectoral issues.

The Forums are free and anyone with an interest in fuel poverty is welcome to attend!

Rising to the challenge of eradicating fuel poverty in Wales

In October, the Welsh Assembly Government published the findings of its Living in Wales survey. This showed that although fuel poverty had fallen significantly between 1998 and 2004 – from 330,000 to 134,000 households – subsequent unprecedented energy price increases have resulted in the number of fuel-poor households almost doubling to 240,000, between 2004 and 2006. Of these 240,000 households 209,000 are classed as “vulnerable”.

The statistics show that there is clearly a significant challenge to overcome if the Assembly Government’s fuel poverty targets - to eradicate fuel poverty among vulnerable households by 2010 and among all households by 2018 – are to be met. In order to overcome these challenges, all parts of government will need to work together with the voluntary and private sectors. The forums play an important part in helping to develop a co-ordinated approach fuel poverty; most of those attending are involved in providing the services and the support that is needed to make a difference. By ensuring we share information and best practice we promote the joint up working needed to help make a difference.

We want to thank the eighty representatives that took part in the sessions. We would also like to thank guest speakers, and are grateful to Lindsey Kearton, Jenny Saunders, Anita Myfanwy, and Craig Mitchell for sharing their knowledge and expertise. This report back picks out the key messages from both the North and South Wales Forums held in October 2007.

Cheers to more future networking!

Nuria Zolle
Director, NEA Cymru
November 2007

Messages from the forums...

Forum members identified a number of issues that can help inform the all Wales Fuel Poverty Advisory Group' thinking when it considers making recommendations to Jane Davidson, Minister for Housing, Sustainability and Environment.

Consumer Representation and Advocacy

Participants generally agreed that there was scope for developing better referral and advice services to ensure that vulnerable people are supported in accessing the income and energy efficiency measures that they are entitled to.

Examples of best practice in Wales

It is important to note that most of the examples highlighted by partners from a wide range of case studies involve a joined up cross sector approach

- ☞ Warm Wales
- ☞ Keep well this winter
- ☞ Health through warmth
- ☞ Better advice better health

Fuel poverty and child poverty

Participants were very concerned at the prevalence of fuel poverty amongst children and the impact on their health. The main priority identified by participants was income maximisation, again emphasising the need for joined-up referral and advice services. Participants also prioritised joined-up action to address the problems faced by children living in poor quality private rented accommodation.

Fuel poverty and climate change

Participants felt that action to tackle fuel poverty needed to be commensurate with the goal of reducing carbon – there was some concern that funding for oil-based heating through HEES was not in line with this goal. Participants also recognised that the fuel poor were likely to have lower energy use and may have a lower carbon footprint, although inefficient, poor quality housing may offset this.

Consumer Representation and Advocacy

Lindsey Kearton, Senior Policy Officer from the Welsh Consumer Council was invited as a guest to talk about consumer advocacy and representation:

Key highlights from her presentation included:

- ~~///~~ The **Consumer Redress and Estate Agents Bill will abolish energywatch, the Welsh Consumer Council and postwatch** in their current form as of next year.
- ~~///~~ **An enhanced organisation** will be created which will merge current policy and advocacy roles currently undertaken by the Welsh Consumer Council, energy watch and postwatch. The operational name, strategic priorities and structure of which is currently unknown but will be operational from the 1st October 2008.
- ~~///~~ The changes will result in much greater reliance being placed on the **companies own complaints handling procedures in the new system than at present**. Customers will either have to have completely exhausted the internal complaints handling procedures of their own supplier, or will have to wait before progressing their complaint to an independent agency.
- ~~///~~ In terms of Fuel Poverty the Welsh Consumer Council is advocating for;
 - o **More holistic approach needed**
 - o **Financial assistance/advice needs to be better targeted**
 - o **All types of vulnerable household need to be identified – not just the easiest to reach/treat**
 - o **More emphasis on affordability**
 - o **Maximising income**
 - o **Reducing cost of energy for most vulnerable (social tariffs)**

Forum participants were asked to describe the needs of vulnerable consumers in Wales:

They highlighted how people on low incomes, struggle between keeping warm and paying bills and described how this struggle forms part of a complex picture; poor housing conditions, high energy costs, inadequate insulation and inefficient heating systems, poverty, debt, ill health, lack of choices.

They also identified specific vulnerable groups amongst these; the elderly, ethnic minority communities, people experiencing ill health and mental health.

Participants also highlighted how certain payment methods can lead to vulnerable consumers paying more and the importance of recognising that current benefit levels are not enough to lift people out of fuel poverty and that energy prices have pushed working families into fuel poverty.

Forum Member were asked to identify the type of support needed in Wales and select their top priorities for action:

The priority identified by the largest number of participants was income maximisation: ensuring that everyone accesses their full entitlements. This was

followed by increasing the level and quality of advice; debt advice and advice on energy efficiency, including advice on HEES and EEC. Participants highlighted the need to ensure that utility companies advise vulnerable groups about their social schemes, particularly social tariffs. They also identified need for a more co-ordinated referral processes.

Best practice examples

Jenny Saunders, Acting Chief Executive for NEA, described a European fuel poverty project NEA has been involved, along with a number of partner organisations in France, Italy, Belgium and Spain. The project seeks to obtain a coherent overview of the scale of fuel poverty in these countries and share experiences from existing programmes.

Key highlights from Jenny's work to date included:

- ~~NEA~~ **Partners understanding of fuel poverty varies** for example, a number of French agencies published a Fuel Poverty Manifesto in (2005) whilst in Spain there is an almost total absence of awareness or concern about the issue
- ~~NEA~~ **A common definition is problematic-** adoption of the UK models seems unfeasible without a major revision of national housing survey data. In any case the UK model is better suited to target-setting than to identifying fuel-poor households. The best proxy may be the presence or absence of energy efficiency measures.
- ~~NEA~~ **The UK model is valuable but flawed-** the incidence of fuel poverty has more than double between 2004 and 2006.
- ~~NEA~~ **Belgium and France demonstrate elements of an embryonic fuel poverty strategy-** both have a number of policies and programmes that address all aspects of the problem but in an un co-ordinated and piecemeal manner.
- ~~NEA~~ **Italy and Spain demonstrate minimal provision to address fuel poverty-** There is no general recognition that a major social problem even exists.
- ~~NEA~~ **Future energy policy will increasingly be driven by EU-** both in terms of energy efficiency and protection of disadvantaged energy consumers.
- ~~NEA~~ **Environmental priorities represent both an opportunity and threat-** they appear likely to impact in the form of higher energy prices. Whilst this is clearly a potential problem it could also concentrate minds on action to minimise consumption whilst recognising the need for social equity.

Examples of how partner countries are tackling fuel poverty included;

France- Awareness of fuel poverty issues is well advanced in France although there remains a lack of connection between the presence of symptoms and a rational diagnosis. It is recognised that fuel poverty solutions will always involve a combination of measures to maximise household incomes, minimise fuel costs and optimise the energy efficiency of the dwelling but at this point in the development of fuel poverty strategy in France the emphasis is still strongly on addressing the most obvious symptom (unpaid bills) through the most obvious and short term method (payment of bills by a third party).

Belgium- Awareness of fuel poverty in Belgium is at an embryonic stage. All of the components to develop a co-ordinated strategy for affordable warmth appear, to some extent, to be in place but at present they represent fragmented and often individual responses to what must be seen as a multi-faceted problem. The CPAS network in Wallonia provides some indication of what an integrated fuel poverty project might look like and, provided the different elements of work are sufficiently well resourced, is a model worthy of replication.

Italy- It is apparent that whilst Italy does possess the potential framework to develop fuel poverty programmes, a failure to analyse, monitor, assess or even

understand the scale and nature of the problem militates against any coherent action to tackle the problem.

Spain- There is no real infrastructure because there is no perception of fuel poverty as a significant social problem. Without any form of internal debate on the issue it is difficult to see where we can start to make progress. Recognition of the problem has to be the first stage in developing a solution.

Jenny asked participants to identify what constitutes best practice in Wales in terms of assessing: income, prices and energy efficiency of housing.

Participants identified a wide selection of schemes and were asked to prioritise- these are the one's that received a significant amount of ticks!

- ~~///~~ Warm Wales
- ~~///~~ Keep well this winter
- ~~///~~ Health through warmth
- ~~///~~ Better advice better health
- ~~///~~ Housing Quality Standard

Child poverty and fuel poverty

Anita Mywanfy, End Child Poverty Network Development Officer, provided an overview of child poverty in Wales and highlighted the effect fuel poverty has on children.

Child poverty and housing

- 35,000 children in Wales are living in poor housing
- 43,000 children in Wales living in overcrowded conditions
- Prevalence of asthma in Wales is among the highest in the world
- Since 2000, homeless acceptances doubled. In 2005, 7,000 people with dependent children were accepted by LA as homeless.
- Numbers in temporary accommodation trebled over past 2 years
- Education: Children miss out on 25% of their schooling
- Health: Households in poor housing likely to use health services 50% more than other households

The impact this has on children

- Risk of infectious or respiratory disease
- Colds, flu and long-term illnesses
- Depression, anxiety & stress
- Education attainment
- Stigma & social exclusion
- Physical, mental and social development and well-being

Forum members were asked to discuss synergies:

Participants identified a significant amount of links between child poverty and fuel poverty:

Health and wellbeing

Participants were concerned about the negative health consequences that living in cold damp homes has on children, ultimately leading to lower life expectancy. There was particular concern about rates of asthma, which participants felt might be linked to fuel poverty. There was discussion about the impact of cold-related ill health on children's educational attainment, especially if it meant they were missing out on schooling. A number of participants raised issues surrounding unhealthy eating – either because families cannot afford the energy to run cooking appliances, or more because an increasing proportion of their household income is needed to pay energy bills; reducing the amount available to make healthy food choices.

Housing

Participants discussed their concerns about housing conditions, particularly in the private rented sector. They highlighted the need to reinforce better mandatory housing conditions specifically in relation to private landlords.

Low income

There was a widespread view that low income was the underlying problem for those in child poverty and fuel poverty.

Participants were also asked to highlight potential areas for joint working:

- Income maximisation – getting different agencies to work together to reach poor families and more joined up provision of advice on fuel poverty, income maximisation and availability of grants
- Improving housing conditions, particularly in the private rented sector which had not benefited from the progress in social rented stock as a consequence of the Welsh Housing quality Standards, possibly through accreditation of landlords
- The NHS and Public NHS could work more with others to address the consequences of fuel poverty
- Some suggested setting up a “Care & Repair” type organisation for households with children

Climate Change and fuel poverty

Craig Mitchell (Welsh Local Government Association), provided an overview of climate change in Wales and its links to fuel poverty.

We asked Craig to highlight key highlights from his section

Craig said, "Climate Change is a significant government priority and this is reflected within One Wales through the Carbon reduction targets, Climate Change Commission and in previous aspirations toward carbon neutral buildings by 2011.

All public agencies will have to respond to this agenda and the documents attached give some insight into how that might play out.

There are always divergent policies, conflicts and paradoxes in public policy, therefore activity which seems to run counter to the Climate Change agenda such as road building may still be justified on economic grounds as there is a need to ensure balanced growth.

However there is also a danger that in pursuing a particular policy area too vigorously that issues such as fuel poverty may get squeezed; basically the client groups that are being targeted may be very different, carbon rich versus fuel poor.

It is possible to reconcile these approaches through the concept of Sustainable Development; in essence solutions to Climate Change are not sustainable unless they deal with issues such as fuel poverty.

At this stage concepts such as personal carbon budgeting may have theoretical interest but real world application would be difficult, from a political, bureaucratic and social equality aspect."

Participants were asked to highlight links between agendas and discuss the benefits of carbon saving schemes

Many participants thought that people in fuel poverty were likely to have lower energy use and therefore contribute less to climate change. However, lower quality, inefficient housing could offset this.

Participants had a detailed discussion of personal carbon trading. Possible benefits included greater personal responsibility, but saw this difficult to enforce. Some felt there was scope for carbon trading to encourage private landlords to improve energy efficiency

Others were concern about grants for oil-based central heating through HEES. This was felt to be expensive – in terms of set up and running cost– and its environmental impact; there was a view that oil-based systems produce more carbon than gas.

Some thought that there was scope to expand existing good practice where RSL's are incorporating renewable energy into their properties – thereby, reducing energy costs for tenants as well as reducing carbon use. These types of schemes could be rolled out to the wider social housing stock.

Moving forwards: Next steps

- ✍* A copy of this report will be sent to the Welsh Fuel Poverty Advisory Group. The WFPAG was set up to advise the Minister for Sustainable Development, Housing and Environment with responsibility for eradicating fuel poverty.
- ✍* The next fuel poverty forums will take place;
South Wales- Thursday 6th March 2008
North Wales- Thursday 13th March 2008

We look forwards to seeing you at the next fuel poverty forum!

Appendix

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