



*Ymgyrchu Dros Gartrefi Clyd
Campaigning for Warm Homes*

South and North Wales Fuel Poverty Forums

Report Back
April 2008

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!

Listen up!

This month over 110 participants attended the North and South Wales Fuel Poverty Forums (the highest level of attendees ever!).

Recent energy price hikes are impacting on us all, but have a more severe effect on the most vulnerable members of our community who are left having to make difficult choices often at the expense of their health and wellbeing. At both North and South Wales, forum sessions, participants identified the need for development workers across Wales who are in direct contact with vulnerable groups to be brought together to put forward their ideas for action. They said it was important that the Assembly Government takes into account the views of forum participants. Forum sessions are composed of people who have first hand experience of implementing the policies that impact on real people and know what is and isn't working, and as such they have a wealth of knowledge and a commitment to working with others to help combatting fuel poverty.

In particular they highlighted the need to engage them in the review of the fuel poverty strategy and their wish to ensure that the Fuel Poverty Advisory Group and Assembly Government take their recommendations/ suggestions into account. NEA Cymru has been providing regular fuel poverty forum briefings to representatives of the Welsh Fuel Poverty Advisory Group and will continue to ensure that these messages are conveyed. We will also discuss with Government officials a way of ensuring Forum representatives can feed into the review of the fuel poverty strategy.

This sense of engagement and ownership of the fuel poverty agenda needs to be built on and we look forwards to working with participants to help foster the links that can lead to a greater collaboration and understanding of how we can together help eradicate fuel poverty in Wales.

We have been asked by participants to keep our report back short so in this report back we have only highlighted some of the key ideas/ comments and suggestions gathered on the day, a full copy of all the transcripts/ comments made by participants in their feedback forms is available on request.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank **Andrew Lloyd (SWALEC), Heather Watts (Scottish Power), Julia Williams (Welsh Assembly Government)** and **Megan Meeke (Shelter Cymru)** and **Carol Martin (NPHS)** for sharing their knowledge and expertise.

We would also like to thank participants and look forwards to more future networking!

Nuria Zolle
Director, NEA Cymru
April 2008

The discussions

At forum sessions keynote speakers are invited to share their expertise and knowledge of how fuel poverty can be eradicated in Wales. At the South Wales Forum session Alan Lloyd (SWALEC) spoke about the role of CERT and Julia Williams (W.A.G.) described action taken by the Welsh Assembly Government to tackle fuel poverty. Unfortunately Carol Martin (NHPS) was unable to attend this forum session nevertheless a short presentation was shared with participants on the links between fuel poverty and health. At the North Wales session Heather Watts (Scottish Power) spoke about their company's social tariff, Megan Mekeen (Shelter Cymru) spoke about the WHQ standard and Carol Martin (NHPS) delivered a presentation explaining synergies between action to tackle fuel poverty and prevent ill health.

Following on from speakers' presentations, participatory workshops took place whereby participants in groups were asked to discuss key areas and come up with ideas for action or identify areas for further joint up working. Participants were encouraged to actively take part and to network with colleagues, so that together we can plant the seeds for future collaborations.

At the end of sessions participants were asked to fill in a feedback form, to help us identify what works, as well as, key themes for future workshops.

Forum members identified a number of issues that can help inform the all Wales Fuel Poverty Advisory Group's thinking when it considers making recommendations to Jane Davidson, Minister for Housing, Sustainability and Environment. The main findings are contained in this report, however full transcripts are available on request.

Findings

Helping achieve the fuel poverty commitment for Wales' targets

A number of issues were discussed:

- **Identifying the funding mechanisms that are available to tackle fuel poverty**
- **How can we best ensure hard to reach and vulnerable groups access their full entitlements in terms of take up of grants and benefits?**
- **How can we tackle fuel poverty in an environment of increased energy prices?**
- **How can we engage and encourage private landlords to take action?**

Identifying the funding mechanisms that are available to tackle fuel poverty

Participants identified a number of available sources of funding. However, not everyone was aware of some of the sources of funding available. In particular participants wanted to find out more about funding from energy companies and available tariffs for vulnerable groups. They also discussed how persuading householders of all socio- economic groups to take advantage of the assistance available is inhibited by the plethora of different funding programmes in operation. They wanted to find out more about the role CERT and other utility programmes in Wales play. In particular they highlighted a lack of understanding as to whom and how you can access utility funds, what they fund and how much is available. Some of the funds/ funding support mechanisms they wanted to find out more included:

- Utility trust funds
- Crisis loans
- Social Tariffs
- CERT

Participants also identified a number of Charitable Trusts and voluntary sector grants that can fund action on fuel poverty.

- Big Lottery, Comic Relief
- Credit Unions

They also identified a number of public sector grant schemes provided by local authorities and European funding streams.

- European funding (Convergence)
- Local Authority capital programmes
- House renovation grants and house assistance

Participants highlighted that sharing of funding streams which have supported action on fuel poverty in Wales could help encourage others to follow suit and would help demystify the funding process. They also highlighted that short term funding is a recurring problem which causes the closure of good initiatives and projects.

How can we best ensure hard to reach and vulnerable groups access their full entitlements in terms of take up of grants and benefits?

Participants identified an extensive list containing front line staff and key service providers as well as trusted Community Leaders or advisors who could encourage take-up. No single contact was given a higher degree of priority; this indicates that any successful intervention needs to adequately respond to the needs, characteristics and circumstances that affect fuel poor households within any given area.

- Community Groups/Clubs/Church groups/Day Centre's
- Local Authorities, GPs, Health Visitors, Councillors and Town Councils

Awareness events and publicity campaigns were the most common type of intervention identified. Interventions were described as needing a "*Community Champion*", or follow up, "*Provide full case work service to actually complete forms, advocate on people's behalf, represent at appeals*". Participants also identified the need to ensure any information provided is accessible and tailored to meet the needs of vulnerable groups.

- Translating information, utilising people's pay slips, doctors appointment cards, door to door, with flu jabs

They also highlighted the need to establish referral mechanisms that can help ensure vulnerable groups receive holistic advice from specific organisations, the most quoted being GP's surgeries.

It is also important to highlight that certain sector representatives were described as being "trusted" sources of information and that there is a need to further our understanding of the specific role different sectors play when it comes to accessing hard-to-reach groups.

How can we tackle fuel poverty in an environment of increased energy prices?

Participants identified energy advice as a potent tool for delivering energy savings, both in its own right and in combination with the installation of energy saving measures. They identified a role for more joint up working in this area, and highlighted the need for "*energy advice provision to also encompass benefit take up and money advice*".

They also highlighted the role utility companies play and the need for these to consider:

- Pre payment meters
- Social Tariffs
- Pricing that is fair and equitable

It was also highlighted that both suppliers and government needed to work together to:

- Ensure energy saving products were more affordable
- Consider extra payments to vulnerable tenants & owners in properties with low SAP Rating which can't be improved
- Fuel companies not to go above rate of inflation (Fuel Payment increases lower than fuel cost rises) government capped enforced
- Consider providing automatic social tariffs for those on particular benefits & information on other schemes

Participants identified the need to continue to lobby government to help ensure the fuel poor are being protected, and also that they are taking into account the needs of those fuel poor households just above the benefit threshold who don't

qualify for any assistance. They came up with a number of initiatives, some aimed at the Welsh Assembly Government and others at Westminster for example:

- Provide benefit increase in line with inflation
- Extend eligibility for winter fuel payments
- Consider eligibility criteria for HEES: is it targeting fuel poor?
- Consider a fuel poverty benefit take up campaign
- Consider a rolling programme of repairs to be included in the entitlement of HEES so there is no crisis management
- Council's to encourage householders to take up renewable and provide incentives e.g. lowering their council tax
- Lobby for regional price allowances in benefit entitlements
- Target HEES to vulnerable households: Ensure all communities first areas are accessing HEES

How can we engage and encourage private landlords to take action?

A number of initiatives were identified by participants; aimed at ensuring private landlords take action to combat fuel poverty. Below we have highlighted those that were more recurring.

- Council enforcement
- Housing Health & Safety rating system includes action on fuel poverty
- Convert Local Authorities accreditation scheme
- Energy Performance certificate linked to rent officer services – incentives landlords
- An effective complaints procedure – retaliatory evictions
- Engage with them at the point of purchase – especially new developers who are involved in 'buying to let' schemes
- Simplifying/clarifying planning & grant application

The Welsh Housing Quality Standard and fuel poverty

A number of areas were discussed:

- **What are the main barriers to ensuring that all of Wales' existing housing stock is brought up to an adequate standard for health and warmth?**
- **What can be done to address the barriers to improving the housing stock?**
- **Can home improvements alone tackle fuel poverty? Please explain your reasons why**

What are the main barriers to ensuring that all of Wales' existing housing stock is brought up to an adequate standard for health and warmth?

Participants highlighted available funding as being the biggest barrier towards the implementation of the Welsh Housing Quality Standard. They also identified that the nature of the Welsh housing stock (off the mains gas/solid walls), as a major barrier in some areas which makes the implementation of energy efficiency standards difficult in some areas. Lack of targeting was also cited in terms of whether it was fuel poverty or energy efficiency that needed to be prioritised. Participants they also raised issues around the lack of knowledge as to grants and other funding streams that can help improve the housing stock, as well as a lack of partnership working between public, private and community groups. Other barriers made reference to the implementation of the WHQ in particular:

- Lack of penalties for not achieving WHQS
- Inconsistency in reporting on Condition of Housing Stock (WHQS)

What can be done to address the barriers to improving the housing stock?

Participants said a more targeted approach (for example an area based approach) would be helpful, equipped with better information of the communities housing stock and community needs in the area. Information about the type of housing and enforcement of a system of reporting which is equipped with a performance framework were also raised.

- WAG should ensure that all LA's and Housing Associations use the same reporting mechanisms and ways of collating information and information systems e.g. Surveying on energy efficiency, stock conditions.

They raised the issues of inconsistency as to methods used. This led to a lack of steer, accompanied by a lack of leadership and any form of comparable assessment that can help ensure performance is assessed across the board.

Increased understanding and awareness of all available funding including CERT was seen as key to helping ensure landlords achieve the WHQs. On the theme of maximisation all available sources of income to help tackle fuel poverty stakeholders also highlighted the need to ensure:

- WAG to consider in its review of HEES and contract with EAGA whether they can maximise funds if they leave utilities fund the insulation measures & WAG only funds heating systems and measures not covered by CERT.

Can home improvements alone tackle fuel poverty? Please explain your reasons why

Participants said that whilst energy efficiency measures and housing improvements could help improve low income housing conditions and help them reduce costs, housing improvements alone would not help tackle all of the problems of fuel poverty:

- Can't tackle Fuel Poverty without really tackling poverty – better minimum wage and benefit levels
- Social issues are important and need to be considered, for some houses traditional home improvements will not suit their conditions and microrenewables can be too costly

Joining up: health and fuel poverty

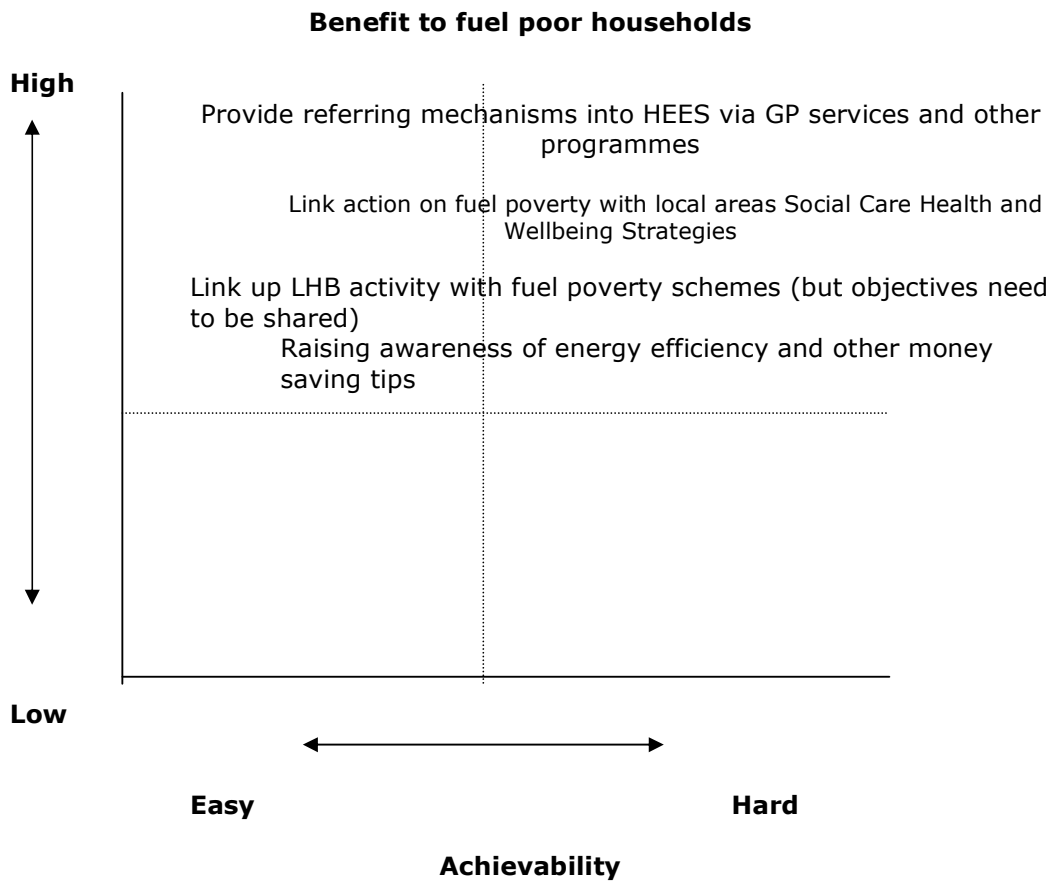
In previous sessions, participants had put forward ideas of how we can work together with the health sector to help combat fuel poverty:

- Raising awareness of energy efficiency and money saving tips
- Providing referral mechanisms into HEES via GP surgery
- Help pool resources and expertise
- Link up LHB activity with fuel poverty schemes
- Introducing energy champions amongst health workers
- Link action on fuel poverty with local areas Social Care Health and Wellbeing Strategies
- Front line staff can help ensure advice is reaching out to vulnerable groups
- Help with projects aimed at supporting people with mental health problems

Participants were asked to in groups place these in a correlation chart to help highlight how achievable (easy or difficult) and the impact (low or high) they felt

these initiatives would have on low income groups. Participants were also encouraged to come up with new ideas for action.

For many of the activities, there was no clear consensus as to whether they were easily achievable or high impact. This in itself reflects the difficulties experienced by groups when trying to prioritise and rank activities. Whilst most activities were seen as important some groups couldn't agree whether the impact of these activities would be high or low. Nevertheless, there were some strong correlations amongst some groups that can help inform our decisions on what actions if prioritised could (according to participants) be easy to implement and have the highest impact:



Next steps

- A copy of this report will be sent to the **Welsh Fuel Poverty Advisory Group** on **April 22nd**. 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- Tuesday 18th November, Abergavenny
North Wales- Wednesday 19th November, Llangollen

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