

FUEL POVERTY FOCUS

WINTER 2020



Action for Warm Homes



WISHING YOU A WARM AND SAFE CHRISTMAS
AND A HAPPY NEW YEAR

++STOP PRESS++

Meet the Utilita Energy High 5 Winners

This winter will be difficult for thousands living in fuel poverty, which is why NEA has partnered with Utilita to provide £500 of funding as part of the Utilita Energy High Five Awards. This funding will support work to tackle fuel poverty in local communities. There is a huge range of activities taking place from children's art competitions to display energy efficiency measures, to providing winter-warmer packs which will provide essentials for shielding householders.

We had an outstanding selection of applicants but we have chosen twenty worthy winners:

- Fuel Bank Foundation
- Public Voice CIC
- Repowering Ltd
- Citizens Advice South Lincolnshire
- Southwark Group of Tenants Organisation
- Aelwyd Housing Association
- Groundwork London
- Middlesbrough Council
- Southport Eco Centre
- Citizens Advice Derbyshire Districts
- Citizens Advice Purbeck
- Chichester Wellebing
- Sefton O.P.E.R.A
- Citizens Advice Allerdale
- Groundwork Yorkshire
- South Dartmoor Community Energy
- Sufra NW London
- Thanet District Council
- Thurrock Council
- National Energy Foundation

Read the full article on the NEA website:
www.nea.org.uk/news/meet-the-utilita-energy-high-5-winners/

Warm and Safe Homes in Fishwick

In 2013 around 380 households in Fishwick, Preston had external wall insulation installed through the Community Energy Saving Programme (CESP) which required energy suppliers and electricity generators to deliver energy-saving measures to domestic consumers in specific low-income areas of Britain. These interventions should have made homes more energy efficient but for many households in Fishwick, the choice of measures and quality of work was poor, and properties developed severe damp and mould.

Following a number of complaints Ofgem subsequently enforced the energy supplier to remediate 62 properties where the householders had come forward to report problems but, with the original contractor at this point insolvent, many others have had to continue to live with the appalling consequences of this work. We know that there are other failed CESP projects in Fishwick and potentially in other parts of Preston where similar problems exist. The area affected has high levels of deprivation and fuel poverty. To provide some insight and better help us to understand the horrific impacts on day to day living in these conditions, we have included some recent photographs of the state of the properties in Fishwick.





NEA knows that, done well, insulation makes homes warmer, healthier and can make energy more affordable. The charity has around £3 million funding available to design and deliver a programme of work to the highest technical standards and with excellent customer service to put right the failed insulation in some of the worst affected households in Fishwick. Whilst this is a substantial amount of funding, we also know it won't be sufficient to address the impact on all households and so the project delivery model includes detailed property and social analysis to help us target resources to make things better for the worst affected properties and households. NEA is working with Preston City Council and other stakeholders and partners to ensure that the delivery model maximises the use of other funding streams such as ECO3, Green Homes Grants etc. but there are considerable limitations to some of these programmes and it is unlikely they will be able to provide any significant impact.

NEA continues to follow government guidance to ensure the safety of our staff and the people of Fishwick, which means that unfortunately, we have been unable to conduct face to face activity in the community. We have however been busy behind the scenes progressing the various components of the project to ensure that when we are able to move around more freely, we have everything ready and set to go.

We have asked key community stakeholders to help us by taking part in our call for evidence – if you think you would be right for completing this or would like more information you can contact Danielle Butler on danielle.butler@nea.org.uk

In August we sent out a questionnaire to all households in Fishwick affected by the failed insulation. So far 87 Fishwick households have responded which provides important information to help us better understand the households we hope to help and what help we can give.

We're also preparing for a technical evaluation which is just commencing. Householders who returned their surveys have been selected to participate. The technical evaluation will measure the effectiveness of the improvements made and the impacts on living conditions.

Once Coronavirus restrictions are lifted property surveys will be carried out and reports issued to all households that have had a survey. Detailed discussions will then be held with some households that will have repair work completed on their homes. Work in homes to put right the effects of the failed insulation will then take place and NEA has limited funds so the project will aim to help those who have been worst affected first.

NEA is also offering energy efficiency advice as well as support for households experiencing problems paying energy bills. We can also help with confidential benefits/income advice. The support is available throughout the project by calling Jo Boswell on 0800 9159075 or emailing fishwick@nea.org.uk

We also have helpful resources, produced in five languages, available to download for free from our website: Help during COVID-19 and Top energy saving tips.



Utility Debt and COVID-19

2020 has been a difficult year for many people, and for many reasons; increasing pressures on the NHS and other essential services; increasing feelings of loneliness and isolation, missing out on celebrations with friends and family; fears and anxieties associated with the risk of catching the disease; and the sense of loss of control from not knowing what lies ahead or being able to do anything about what does.

Add to this the financial impact – the loss of jobs, of whole industries shutting down; the increasing levels of household bills with limited means to meet them; the uncertainty of being placed on furlough and what that means for your future; having to navigate the world of benefits claims, payment holidays and crisis funds, possibly for the very first time – and you have what can only be described as an ‘annus horribilis’.

Data shows that our clients, the low-income and vulnerable households we support, are most likely to have been hit hardest by job cuts and reduced incomes: “the weighted average median pay in the five hardest-hit sectors is around £10.60 per hour; for the five least affected sectors, it is around £14.60 – or nearly 40 percent higher”.¹

As highlighted in our recent paper ‘Surviving the Wilderness: the landscape of personal debt in the UK’², debt charities and organisations have seen a change in the types of debts customers struggle with since the last recession, moving from credit cards, loans, and mortgages, to smaller, trickier debts such as arrears on household bills. This trend is continuing during this period of financial uncertainty.

In response to the financial impact of the crisis, lenders and suppliers across all sectors started to offer short-term payment holidays to customers to help them manage their household outgoings during periods of lockdown and income volatility. As the pandemic progressed, many of these payment holidays have been extended, allowing customers up to six months of deferred payments.

While these breaks might offer short-term relief, debt and interest still accrue, and the impact of this accumulated debt may be significant to those accessing the payment breaks once their repayments start again. This is not the long-term solution to debt.

The FCA recently updated their guidance on support for consumer credit customers impacted by coronavirus³, highlighting the importance of assessing an individual’s situation before agreeing to a payment deferral, instead providing tailored support where a deferral is not in their best interest. This should be considered best practice and should be replicated in other sectors in line with ability to pay principles.

Since our paper was published in early November, the landscape has changed again. StepChange recently reported that “since the beginning of the outbreak 22% (3.2 million) of those affected have fallen into arrears (compared to 19% in May) ... the average amount of arrears among those affected is £1,365 (compared to £1,076 in May) and the total among those affected is now £3.8 billion”⁴.

Ofgem has released a consultation outlining their intention to increase the Default Tariff Price Cap by £21 to cover the cost of increased bad debt in energy⁵. This announcement has generated a lot of activity across social media, with many feeling it is the wrong decision. But, as can be seen from the cycle of debt in utilities, suppliers face increased costs from unpaid bills, not just from the debt owed, and these costs need to be covered to avoid supplier failures and further increases to bills. Ofgem has an obligation to ensure that the price cap covers the reasonable costs of supplying energy, and so has acted to take the new bad debt into consideration. However, this solution results in increasing bills, when debt levels are rising because households can’t afford the bills they currently have. Is the real issue here that not enough has been done to manage these unprecedented levels of debt at source?

We believe it is vitally important that we understand what debt levels are across all sectors. While £21 a year might not seem like a lot of money to some, if all household bills increased by this amount, or more, this would become significant, and could push huge numbers of people who are ‘just about managing’ into severe financial difficulty.

We outlined five recommendations in our recent debt paper, which, despite this ever-changing landscape, we still stand by:

1. Government should bring forward Breathing Space and extend the respite period offered.
2. The UK Government should make contributions for payment matching schemes.
3. Consistent ‘Ability to Pay’ and debt collection principles should be implemented across all essential household bills.
4. Opportunities for maximising data sharing should be explored, including utilising existing mechanisms, such as building on the Priority Services Register and acting on powers within the Digital Economy Act, to ensure that support is offered to customers moving into financial difficulty at the earliest possible opportunity.
5. All companies should consider how a single definition of ‘severe indebtedness’ can ensure customers are treated fairly.

It is extremely important that household bills are not considered in isolation, but that we can see the whole picture to support customers fully. The priorities for now therefore need to be focused on the wider support to customers, and not on increasing bills:

- Change the Warm Home Discount (and similar support in other utilities) so that all qualifying households can receive it automatically;
- Maintain the £20 per week uplift to Universal Credit to avoid the situation worsening when the current uplift expires in April 2021; and
- Companies should offer households more ‘breathing space’, giving them time to develop a plan to clear their debt, even if the UK Government doesn’t bring forward the current Breathing Space legislation⁶.

Endnotes

- 1 McKinsey & Company, 2020. COVID-19 in the United Kingdom: Assessing jobs at risk and the impact on people and places. Available at: <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-in-sights/covid-19-in-the-united-kingdom-assessing-jobs-at-risk-and-the-impact-on-people-and-places#>
- 2 Surviving the Wilderness: the landscape of personal debt in the UK was published on 4th November 2020. Available here: <https://www.nea.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Surviving-the-wilderness-final-version.pdf>
- 3 FCA confirms support for consumer credit customers impacted by coronavirus (19th November 2020) Available at: <https://www.fca.org.uk/news/press-releases/fca-confirms-support-consumer-credit-customers-impacted-coronavirus>
- 4 Tackling the coronavirus personal debt crisis, StepChange (November 2020) Available at: <https://www.stepchange.org/Portals/0/assets/pdf/tackling-the-coronavirus-personal-debt-crisis.pdf>
- 5 Ofgem ‘Ensuring suppliers can continue to serve customers during COVID-19’ Available at: https://www.ofgem.gov.uk/news-blog/our-blog/ensuring-suppliers-can-continue-serve-customers-during-COVID-19?utm_source=Twitter&utm_medium=Suppliers_continue_serve_customers_during_covid19&utm_term=&utm_content=Suppliers_continue_serve_customers_during_covid19_blog&utm_campaign=Suppliers_continue_serve_customers_during_covid19
- 6 We believe Government should bring forward the current Breathing Space legislation from May 2021 inline with the current end-date of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme in March 2021, and should extend the respite period offered to six months, following the Scottish Government.

Water Poverty Update

We are now halfway through our initial three-year programme focused on water poverty, and it feels like a very exciting time in this space. The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the pressures households face on all their bills, and, possibly for the first time, has shown how anyone can be vulnerable to a dramatic change in circumstances.

When I last updated on our progress, I referenced our recent discussion paper focused on social tariffs, and our calls for a full review of the guidance, eligibility criteria, funding, and support levels, to make this support fairer for all, and to remove the postcode lottery that exists with the current schemes. It was therefore extremely welcome to see the launch of the water affordability review by CCW following a request from UK and Welsh Governments in October of this year.

The CCW review is due to publish their findings in Spring 2021, and will look at social tariffs, but also at other financial support available across the industry and identify opportunities to improve the support offered to financially vulnerable households, which is a welcome development. It will be guided by a panel of experts and informed by two independently delivered pieces of research: the first will undertake a series of in-depth interviews with low-income households, and the second will review cross-sector approaches to effective engagement of customers in affordability support initiatives. Alongside this, stakeholders can provide their views by attending one of a series of stakeholder events, and by submitting a response to an open call-for-evidence which we will be responding to in December.

Our work programme has naturally fallen into four pillars of activity, underpinned by our research, our stakeholder engagement, and our delivery of projects, papers, and campaigns. COVID-19 has impacted on our ability to start practical delivery projects and physical engagement, but we have been focused on influencing in other ways, and on strengthening our thoughts and knowledge base.

Our pillars are outlined below:

MEASURING WATER POVERTY

Despite numerous projects across the industry working to 'eradicate' water poverty, the industry is yet to agree on a common measurement of water poverty.

Regardless of measurement, CCW estimate that 12% of households find their combined water and sewerage bill to be 'unaffordable', and so significant action is required to help those low-income households struggling to afford this essential service.

NEA recommends a common measurement be agreed and adopted by all water companies by the start of the next price control period (2025) alongside a measurement of the 'water poverty gap' to understand the depth of the issue. This does not prevent activity to mitigate the impacts of water poverty taking place now as this can still be targeted to the households most in need.

CHARGING AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT

The two most important factors in determining whether a household is in water poverty are the cost of water and sewerage services (i.e., the combined bill) and the household income. If bills reduce, or incomes increase, then households could potentially move out of water poverty. There is limited scope to influence incomes, other than income maximisation advice and benefits entitlement checks, but water companies and regulators have more flexibility when it comes to bills.

There are only two current charging mechanisms: measured, and unmeasured. Household customers therefore are extremely limited in their tariff options, and so innovation in this area should be encouraged. Low-income households do have additional tariff options available to them: WaterSure for metered households in receipt of an income-related benefit and who use additional water for medical needs or have three or more children; and social tariffs which offer

discounts/bill-caps based on company-specific eligibility criteria and support levels.

NEA has called for a full review of social tariff guidance, funding, eligibility, and support levels to ensure that, regardless of where they live, all customers have fair access to support as needed.

DEBT AND OTHER CONSEQUENCES

In recent years there has been a substantial shift in trends related to personal debt. Households accessing debt support are now more likely to present with smaller, trickier to manage debts, such as household arrears, whereas a decade ago it was more likely to be credit cards and loans.

Since the Water Industry Act (1999) domestic water supply cannot be disconnected or restricted due to arrears, meaning the consequences of non-payment are deemed to be lower in water when compared to other sectors' practices. Although not always the case, water is therefore often the first bill customers default on, and as a result, reported debt levels in the water industry are more than double those seen in energy (last reported as £2.2bn in 2017).

In our recent discussion paper, 'Surviving the Wilderness: the landscape of personal debt in the UK', we put forward a number of key recommendations to assist households in urgent need of support with their debt and arrears following the COVID-19 crisis, including proposals for increased data sharing, debt support funding from UK Government, and a definition of 'severe indebtedness' to help prioritise those in the worst situations.

WATER EFFICIENCY

Outside of household incomes and bill profiles, water efficiency measures also have the ability to save customers money, albeit at a lower level than the potential savings in energy efficiency. When delivered alongside education on how to better use water in the home, there is evidence of customer benefit and savings, especially when focused on the efficient use of hot water as they also benefit from the associated energy savings.

Customers must have a water meter to benefit from the financial savings of water efficiency measures, but unfortunately those on a water meter will have been detrimentally impacted by increased water charges due to spending more time at home during the Covid-19 lockdown. It is therefore extremely important that a balance is found to avoid giving water metering a bad name.

Saving water also has substantial environmental benefits. Sir James Bevan, Chief Executive of the Environment Agency, highlighted that we are heading towards the 'jaws of death' where, in 25 years, we will no longer have the water available to meet our needs. Efficient use of water is therefore extremely important if we are to avoid price increases being used as a tool for sustainable water use.

As we move towards the third year of our work programme, our focus will be on getting some of the practical delivery projects up and running, on drawing out the lived experience of water poverty, and on campaigning for the outcomes of the ongoing affordability review to be implemented by UK and Welsh Government. This feels like the time to really make a difference for water poor customers – it is the biggest opportunity to influence real change, and we will be making sure to maximise it.

For more information on NEA's water poverty work, or to get involved with us, please visit: www.nea.org.uk/water-poverty or contact Jess Cook, Project Development Manager at NEA jess.cook@nea.org.uk. Follow me on twitter: [@JessCook_NEA](https://twitter.com/JessCook_NEA)

Water Forum

Water is probably the most important utility there is when it comes to public health, not only for hydration and wellbeing, but, as has come to the forefront during the COVID-19 pandemic, making sure people can wash their hands.

As well as being keen to make sure customers have had continuity of water supply, members of Northumbrian Water's independent customer challenge group, the Water Forum, were really keen to make sure that customers – and employees – were supported through the many challenges the crisis has brought.

As a utility providing one of the key tools for keeping COVID-19 at bay, it really was up there in terms of the importance of getting the response right. The company needed to respond to demand for water; to ensure its employees were protected so that, apart from anything else, they were able to continue their roles; and to keep a close eye on the emerging difficulties that its customers were facing, such as losing their jobs or being furloughed.

The Water Forum has had the company's services and customer support under the microscope as never before and while we've been pleased to see early action maintained throughout the pandemic, we know there are further challenges ahead and it is our role to give voice to those.

Back in the spring, we were all keenly interested to understand how the company was responding to the emerging pandemic. We were kept informed from the outset and were reassured that it had taken prompt and early action to support customers through what was turning out to be a really difficult situation for everybody.

The message we had from the company was one of strong communications and very active employee involvement, with live weekly video meetings with the Chief Executive and her Leadership Team a visible demonstration of how seriously they took things.

Being equipped to give that support to customers meant taking employee-focused actions – as well as direct, customer-facing measures. With the best will in the world, if nobody is out there working, bad things are going to start happening across the water and sewage networks. Employees' jobs, health, families and so on had to be protected through the acquisition and appropriate use of PPE, following all appropriate government guidelines and through adapted ways of working.

We were pleased to see early action taken, with people being actively redeployed where necessary or working from home wherever possible, following the Government guidelines.

Since getting this early reassurance about the steps taken to make sure there was a clean and plentiful supply of water for drinking and essential hygiene, we've been kept updated and had the chance to ask as many questions as we've needed to. We were pleased to see that Northumbrian Water was an early signatory to the C-19 business pledge, that communications with customers have been strong, and that an extra 1,700 customers in need have been signed up to the Priority Services Register (PSR).

Thousands of customers have had support financially, either through deferred payments or other methods; and while inevitably it's not business as usual, it looks as if the company has been front-footed in the way it has approached the crisis and has continued to up its game in terms of supporting the communities it serves.

This is all really good, but in the minds of the Water Forum members some big questions have arisen from the experience of this past few months. We've been briefed by the company that it is already attending to these, so we will continue our independent challenge in the months and years ahead.

What about customers with deferred payments now moving towards having to repay their debt? Is debt increasing? Are there any issues around that?

Equally, we are thinking about the company's role in the bigger picture of the areas it serves. Utilities are

relatively stable businesses with a pivotal role to play in helping the country get back on its feet, including around some of the more granular issues, such as continuing with apprenticeships and job creation.

There's also the longer-term, bigger picture around the company's ability to work with others on pushing forward with the schemes where money or partnerships are already in place, making sure investment continues and progress is made in tackling climate change and environment issues, that will in turn support the communities and businesses in both areas of the Company's business.

From a customer service point of view, we will keep a keen eye on what the company does around the Priority Services Register. Having more people on PSR is great, but what happens next? How will that information be used to help support them? What steps will it take to move towards its goal of 'zero water poverty' in the context of COVID-19?

With the company having made a real impact in terms of increased customer communications, I would imagine expectations in this area will have increased. With greater understanding of the breadth of support the company can give to those who need it, customer satisfaction will arguably become even more important from here on in.

And I've no doubt there is some reflection going on within the company about how the crisis has changed the way that it might want to operate in future.

But for now, COVID-19 is very much a live issue and one which will remain a live issue for as long as it needs to be; as such, members of the Water Forum will continue to keep our fingers on the pulse of the company's response to the issues I've outlined above.

Melanie Laws is Chair of the independent Water Forum for Northumbrian Water Group, which operates as Northumbrian Water in the North East of England, and as Essex & Suffolk Water in parts of the South East.

Run for NEA

In 2021 we have the Manchester Half Marathon taking place on 23 May and the Great North Run on the 12 September and with only a few places left for each event we would really like your support.

Help us raise awareness and vital funds for those suffering in fuel poverty.

This year we have seen a global pandemic shake the world and many have suffered as a result; we can only imagine the increased impact this has had on those in fuel poverty. Joining us in these events will help NEA continue the fight to eradicate fuel poverty across the UK and ensure everyone has a warm and safe home. With your help, together we can raise awareness and funds to help those in need.

We believe no one should be suffering in cold and unsafe homes and we need you to help us be able to reach out to those in need. Join us today!

"I'm not sick anymore and the home is warm, and baby is not miserable...Judy (NEA) made me aware of all of the incentives and grants available to keep my home warm."

Ms A, NEA HEAT project.

For more information or to register for a place, please email alice.dalgleish@nea.org.uk

Laptops and tablets distributed to rural residents by CAN

Rural residents across Northumberland have been given free laptops and tablets arranged by Community Action Northumberland (CAN) to keep in touch during lockdown and access vital online services, including those living off-grid or who have never used digital tools in their lives.

CAN runs various projects for rural residents and early on in lockdown spotted an urgent need for devices for people from various backgrounds. Children were being home-schooled in lockdown but without electricity to run devices. Unemployed people were trying to job-hunt online but could no longer get access to computers in libraries or community centres. Older people who attended weekly Warm Hubs which bring people together in rural village halls suddenly had no social interaction, and didn't have digital skills or devices to connect with family and friends online.

Thanks to funding from a range of sources CAN staff were able to step in and purchase equipment and deliver it safely to those in need.

Off-grid households gain devices and battery packs

Over 350 households in Northumberland are off the electricity grid, people living and working without a regular energy supply. As part of a project

with the National Lottery Community Fund, CAN has been working to address some of the needs of the children living in these properties within the Northumberland National Park.

17 children, aged five years old up to teenagers, have received their own tablet with a dongle for internet connection. In addition, they all received a rechargeable/solar battery pack so that they can be charged without using any of the household oil-generated electricity. The children will be using the tablets for schoolwork as well as keeping in touch with friends and family.



Christine Nicholls, CAN's Community Development Officer, says: "It's unbelievable in this day and age that children are growing up without a reliable supply of electricity, no hairdryers, automatic kettles or any of the things we all take for granted. The tablets were just a very small way of supporting these children during these challenging times."

Warm Hubs adapts to new ways

CAN's Warm Hubs scheme has also been adapting to a new way of working. A number of local residents unable to attend hub events in their local village hall/community building have also received tablets to help them keep in touch via virtual hubs.

Christine said: "Our oldest laptop beneficiaries are in their nineties and enjoying the experience of learning new skills. Virtual hubs mean we can connect people online, particularly important when the warm hub buildings aren't available.

“Warm hub volunteers have stepped up as always and are shopping, delivering prescriptions, dog walking and providing food parcels and meals via an outreach service. Virtual hubs will never replace face-to-face contact with friends and neighbours, but it helps communities feel less isolated.”



Ninette runs Whittingham Warm Hub and said of one her members who received a tablet from CAN: ‘Margaret is absolutely thrilled with the tablet. It’s all very new to her but I’m working with her friends and family to get them to send her emails. She’s so keen to make it work, and has promised to be a nuisance and keep phoning me when she has difficulties with it!’

“Thank you so much for this opportunity for her. Her son lives in Glasgow so she’s very detached from her family and it means a lot to her. She’s a sprightly 93 year old!”

Unemployed people using CAN’s rural employment hubs have also benefited from access to tablets and laptops to help them job search, prepare new CVs and apply for jobs.

Devices have been generously supported by funding from the Northumberland Estates Community Fund, the Community Foundation, DevicesDotNow and the VCS Skills and Employability Fund.

Community Action Northumberland (CAN) supports individuals and organisations across Northumberland to build their skills and capacity, and promotes rural issues.

Find out more at www.ca-north.org.uk

For more information on this release, please contact Carrie Brookes on 0758 1425753 or email carrie@carriebrookes.co.uk



ECOЕ's Healthy Homes for Wellbeing Project helps those who fall through the gaps

How can a fuel poverty project help a person who is not directly eligible for funding?

That's the question that Exeter Community Energy (ECOЕ) faced in October. An 85-year-old gentleman living in a park home in Torbay, Devon, had just left hospital and found his boiler was broken. This initially seemed an easy problem to fix, explained Tara Bowers, project manager for ECOЕ's Healthy Homes for Wellbeing scheme. It seemed an obvious case for funding from the Energy Company Obligation (ECO) scheme – but this time there was a hitch.

"The problem is that because he's in a park home, he's on bottled gas," said Tara. For local emergency boiler schemes, eligibility is only open to mains gas boilers. "There's absolutely no ECO funding at all to help him," said Tara. The Torbay council also doesn't work with other funding schemes that the Healthy Homes for Wellbeing project might call on in such a case. "So this poor old gentleman is living on income support," Tara recalls. "He suddenly comes home to a cold home and has no money to replace the boiler, which has basically been condemned, and we can't access any of our usual sources of help. So I sat just thought, what do we do? We can't afford to pay for his boiler. I don't know how the hell we're going to get this sorted."

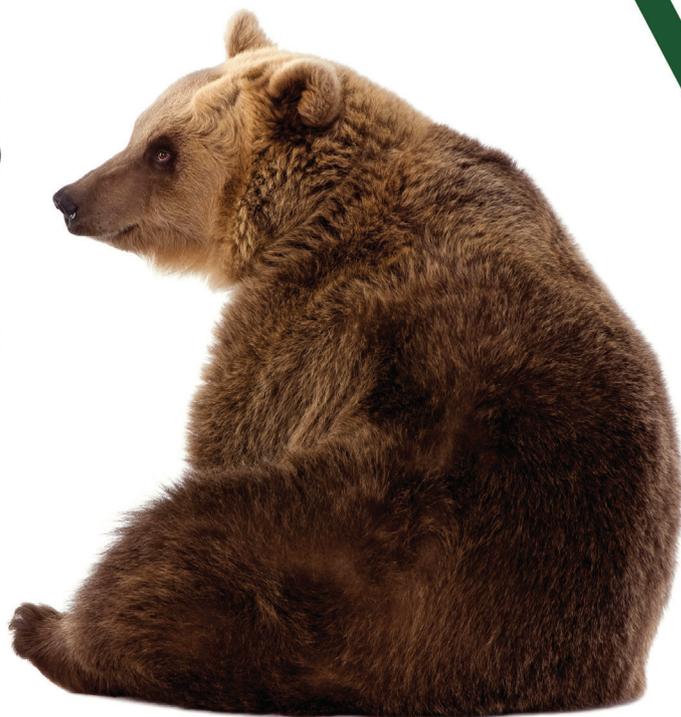
After talking to one of ECOЕ's trusted installers, Tara found a friendly engineer with capacity to help. She also used her contacts within the Cosy Devon network to reach a senior manager at Torbay Council. Tara explained that this man would be homeless unless his boiler was repaired, as his home would not be fit for habitation. The manager therefore agreed to use a crisis fund to pay for a new boiler. "It's going to sort itself out, but in the meantime, this poor old man is sat in a cold home," Tara says.



The man is just one of 353 households that Healthy Homes for Wellbeing has helped since setting up a new, more efficient, recording system in late August. While each individual has their own important story, many involve simpler energy and money saving advice. We assume that these 353 households have saved £313,400.80, and we can account for instant or confirmed savings of £48,098.80. Such amazing results continue to attract funding from our partners, including £15,000 recently from Western Power Distribution. We have therefore been recruiting, with two new advisers amongst the first to do the new online exam for the City and Guilds training run by NEA. We are now just also opening our Winter Warmth campaign for 2020. We are asking for donations of winter fuel payments from people who don't need it, with any other contributions welcome, to help people when other funds can't.

These are not headline stories in the daily news – but are an important positive impact that fuel poverty projects like Healthy Homes for Wellbeing can have.

High bills becoming unbearable?



This December climate change charity, Nottingham Energy Partnership (NEP) launch the Big Notts Switch, a 100% renewable collective switching campaign, which aims to make energy bills more bearable.

Now in its fourth year the initiative puts the onus on the energy companies. To win a pool of new customers, they have to outbid each other by offering the lowest price.

Big Notts Switch is part of a nationwide Collective Switching scheme – so even if you do not live in Nottinghamshire you can still be a part of it through the Big Community Switch. This scheme brings together thousands of people from across the country looking for a better energy price – last year, over 33,000 people registered, and achieved a typical dual fuel saving of £228.

With winter bills around the corner, the campaign comes at a time when households are keen to reduce their outgoings as much as possible. Registering takes only a matter of minutes and there is no obligation to switch.

Miranda Cumberbatch, NEP Affordable Warmth Development Manager urges people to register “Seven out of ten UK households are still overpaying for their energy – this is an easier way for people to switch from those expensive deals, i.e. standard tariffs and variable deals. The more people that register, the cheaper the final deal will be”.

Collective switching tariffs are negotiated by partners iChoosr through an auction, with the best priced tariff winning. These tariffs are typically bespoke and not available elsewhere. Residents who sign up for the scheme can consider the offer before deciding whether or not to switch suppliers. Paper offers are available should households be offline.

To register, visit www.nottenergy.com/bignottsswitch or call 0115 784 6696 – make sure you have your energy provider, tariff name and yearly energy data to hand. You can find this information on a recent annual statement.

If you want to take part, or for more information, please visit: www.nottenergy.com/bignottsswitch or call NEP 0115 784 6696.

Important dates

- Register by 9th February 2021
- Personal offers sent out 22nd February 2021
- Accept offers by Tuesday 23rd March 2021

The auction will be facilitated by iChoosr, independent experts in group buying.

The amount of money that can be saved will vary depending on individual factors such as the current tariff, payment method, consumption and the winning bid. There is no guarantee that an offer will be the cheapest but the model aims to ensure most participants are offered lower annual energy bills than they are currently paying or are available at the time of the offer.

The cost of 'stay at home' – living in lockdown in poor housing

Well, it's an added stress that you don't need. Being at home more, I'm conscious that I'm spending money that I don't have. Again, it's that I'll go and check how much I've got in the meter, right it's £9, okay, that's £9 of electric, and I've got the kids on Thursday or Friday, so I'll try and push and push and push and push each last minute on those machines until I have a payday, and then I'll top up £30 on both. Then I try and stretch it out further and further and further, whereas before it was stretched, but I knew that I could go to work, use my laptop and charge my phone or the laptop to use at home. I wasn't using the TV throughout the day. I wasn't using the heating to do clothing as much, or cook as much at home. The kids aren't on the TV or the Xbox when she's round here.

(Male, 41, lone parent living in Leeds in the private rented sector)

Of all the accounts gathered during the research for the newly released report 'Lockdown. Rundown, Breakdown' from a team of researchers from the University of Huddersfield, this one is one of the most depressing. What is more depressing is the fact that the respondent was in full-time employment in the allied care sector. Furthermore, that he was describing what life was like in his privately rented terrace house in spring this year. Imagine how he's feeling looking towards the winter. His story was not unusual.

The report is the result of research carried out with private renters and owner-occupiers across the north between May and July 2020, just months after lockdown restrictions were introduced in England to prevent the spread of COVID-19. It sets out how issues such as disrepair, cold homes and

lack of space were exacerbated during national lockdown, impacting upon residents' physical and mental health. Residents in the private rented sector faced particular challenges, with many tenants experiencing deteriorating conditions. Fears over being seen as a problem to landlords meant some tenants didn't report repairs, fearing eviction or rent reprisals from landlords.



But it was the findings relating to thermal comfort and energy costs that were amongst the most striking. Home energy costs were a major source of anxiety for residents, who told us about how they faced impossible choices, prioritising rent, heat and food in that order. The findings make it clear that the lockdown created more energy vulnerability for a wider spectrum of the population than was the case pre-pandemic. This is particularly concerning as the daily challenge of living and getting by will be made all the more difficult as winter approaches and homes get colder and people face the prospect of spending more time indoors, with increased financial and job insecurity. The report details accounts of landlord inaction, about attempts by tenants to address and pay for their own repairs, and about how tenants were acutely aware of the impact



that rising energy costs would have for them over the winter.

The report calls for urgent action to mitigate some of the likely dire impacts of a combination of poor housing, insecurity of tenure and employment, reducing state support and rising living costs. The Green Homes Grant, although not perfect, presents at least one immediate opportunity to address some of the remedial work that is required and policy makers are advised to ensure that this opportunity targets those people most in need and actively engages with landlords to overcome any barriers they face.

Issues of housing quality did not begin with lockdown. Rather, households went into lockdown living in homes that were already in a poor state of repair in a sector ill equipped to respond. The stories in the report are not isolated cases – over 1 million homes across the north fail to meet basic decency standards. Such an accumulation of poor-quality housing represents a long-term failure of housing policy. Its presence implies the need for a long-term rebalancing of housing policy – at national, city-region and local levels – so that the quality of our existing homes is treated as a priority equal to the importance of the supply of new homes.

The research was funded by the Northern Housing Consortium, University of Huddersfield and the Nationwide Foundation

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SURREY COMMUNITY ACTION

Local charity, Surrey Community Action is taking its successful Warmth Matters advice service on the road in December (government restrictions permitting) thanks to funding from the National Lottery Community Fund, which distributes money raised by National Lottery players for good causes and is the largest community funder in the UK.

Pop-up hubs will be situated in easily accessible locations and places with a high footfall such as community centres and high streets and aim to be a preventative measure in local communities to end fuel poverty and help people to keep warm for less.

Advice on offer is wide-ranging and includes practical energy saving tips, help to switch energy suppliers and apply for the Warmer Home Discount Scheme, cold weather payments or other charitable grants,

Although the pop-up hubs are open to anyone in need, the project aims to particularly reach people on low incomes, families with young children, older and vulnerable people and those with health issues.

David Carter, Surrey Community Action's Warmth Matters Co-ordinator said: "We know that the pandemic has made finances precarious for some of the poorest and most vulnerable people in Surrey. National Lottery players have enabled us to make our service even more accessible and reach more people to help them to avoid having to choose between heating and eating this winter."





Blitz your winter home energy bills with PECT's Warm Homes project

Would you like to cut your household bills and keep your home warm for less? The charity PECT is relaunching its Warm Homes project, to help improve the lives of vulnerable households that are suffering from or are at risk of fuel poverty.

If you live in Fenland or Huntingdonshire, then PECT (working in partnership with Fenland District Council) can help you with its free energy advice service. The Warm Homes campaign supports residents who are struggling to pay their energy bills or cannot keep their home heated at a sufficient temperature.

With overwhelming evidence that inadequately heated homes can have a detrimental effect on the wellbeing of residents, PECT offers help by providing free energy advice, as well as signposting to other available resources and support.

"Ultimately we want to help cut energy costs and carbon for the benefit of people and the planet," explains Project Officer Nikki Dekker. "People's

ability to keep their homes adequately heated has been further exacerbated by the economic, health and social challenges created by COVID-19. This is a time of great uncertainty, and we want to support people to live healthily and happily."

Huge numbers of homeowners are unable to adequately heat their homes, and this has significant health implications and places enormous pressure on the NHS. PECT's project seeks to tackle this growing issue by providing householders with a free helping hand to make their homes more energy efficient and to help save money on their energy bills.

The service offers help and advice on behavioural changes, choosing the best energy tariff and supplier, managing your water bills, and – where eligible – can assist you to access the national £140 Warm Homes Discount, the Government Green Homes Grant (where households can get a voucher up to £5,000 to make their homes more energy efficient), and other funding opportunities.

To access PECT's Warm Homes service, please contact 01733 568408 ext. 313, email warmhomes@pect.org.uk or visit www.pect.org.uk/WarmHomes.

SSEN appoints Trisha McAuley OBE as Chair of its Inclusive Service Panels

Trisha has over 20 years' experience as a successful senior leader in consumer policy with a track record of high level, impactful and influential stakeholder engagement across a range of sectors, including the energy industry.

SSEN is responsible for the maintenance, operation and development of the electricity distribution networks across the north of Scotland and central southern England. Its Inclusive Service Panels help inform, influence and challenge decision making, with a specific focus on the provision of inclusive and accessible services to benefit and support over 3.8 million customers.



"We're delighted to welcome Trisha as Chair of our Inclusive Service Panels as we enter a key period in our customer and stakeholder engagement programme before submitting our business plan for the RIIO-ED2 price control next year. Trisha succeeds Richard Shakespeare who has successfully driven real change to directly benefit our customers since the panels were formed three years ago.

"Trisha brings extensive, cross-sector experience as a Non-Executive Director and Independent Chair with direct experience in the electricity industry. Her guidance and challenge will be invaluable as we seek to ensure our services are inclusive, accessible to all, and continue to meet the changing needs of the customers and communities we serve, both now and in the future."

SSEN's panels have directly contributed to improving accessibility for its customers as SSEN became the first UK Distribution Network Operator to introduce Easy Read as a communication format. The panels also influenced the organisation to:

- Introduce a website accessibility tool
- Enable customer service and power cut reporting via a British Sign Language video link
- Add subtitles on videos
- Inform SSEN's approach to fuel poverty and energy efficiency
- Review its storm processes and welfare provisions to ensure customers are cared for and supported during power cuts and emergencies

Northern Gas Networks wins most considerate site in the UK at national construction awards

Northern Gas Networks (NGN), the North of England's gas distributor, has won the country's Most Considerate Site Award (project value under £500k) at the annual Considerate Constructors Scheme (CCS) National Site Awards.

In an online ceremony, NGN was presented with the award for the care and consideration it showed towards the local community while it worked to upgrade an above ground installation (AGI) in Selby, North Yorkshire. The win was just one of 19 for NGN sites across the North East, Northern Cumbria and Yorkshire which were shortlisted for the 2020 awards. In total, NGN also garnered seven bronze awards, seven silver awards and four gold awards.

Among NGN's others wins were a gold award for the successful demolition of a gas holder in Darlington, and a silver award for a complex, 60-week project to replace gas mains in Huddersfield, when NGN co-ordinated works other companies such as Yorkshire Water and a fibre optic network builder upgrading the town's broadband, so that the same stretch of road did not have to be excavated repeatedly. This saved a good deal of disruption for local residents and businesses.

Ian Whitehead, Major Projects Programme Manager at Northern Gas Networks, said: "I'm incredibly proud of all our colleagues who have worked so hard to produce such excellence. All our 19 wins are testament to the hard work of our teams, who strive to make sure all our sites observe CCS best practice in terms of appearance, protecting the environment, safety, valuing the workforce and respect for neighbouring communities."

To read more, go to <https://bit.ly/2SZ1psz>





HERTFORDSHIRE'S DISTRICT COUNCILS PARTNER WITH YES ENERGY SOLUTIONS

St Albans City and District Council is one of a number of local authorities in Hertfordshire to launch energy efficiency schemes alongside YES Energy Solutions.

The schemes access the Government's Energy Company Obligation (ECO) to help qualifying residents improve the energy efficiency of their homes to stay warm for less.

Certain residents could receive fully funded insulation and A-rated boiler installs. Help is available for those with high energy bills in relation to their income and those particularly vulnerable to cold.

In addition, elderly residents, those with a young family, pregnant women or residents with a health condition made worse by the cold, could also qualify for funding.

Cllr Chris White, Leader of St Albans District Council, said: "With health being on most people's minds, we are delighted to offer a scheme that can

help to improve winter health by helping residents stay comfortably warm all year round. We want to make sure that every resident is safe and warm in their home this winter, whilst also helping to reduce energy use and carbon emissions for our climate."

"The scheme will also help residents save money by reducing their energy use with greener and more efficient heating systems and insulation which acts like a blanket around your home."

"We hope that we can help residents during the troubling times of the pandemic by providing healthier homes to those in need of help."

Interested residents are advised to call 01422 880100 or visit www.yesenergysolutions.co.uk/schemes/east-of-england



**St Albans
Warmer
Homes**

Leading Sustainability Role for NIE Networks

As Northern Ireland moves towards a new energy landscape, NIE Networks is putting sustainability and decarbonisation at the forefront of their business plans through the recent appointment of Judy McElroy to the newly created role of Sustainability Manager. We talk to Judy about her career progression with the company and what it means to be involved with such a critical aspect of the future for Northern Ireland.

Sponsored by NIE Networks, Judy McElroy graduated with a 1st Class (Hons) Masters degree in Electrical and Electronic Engineering from Queen's University Belfast in 2012, before moving into a permanent role with the organisation.

"NIE Networks sponsored me through their annual scholarship programme in Electrical and Electronic Engineering. Whenever I graduated I went straight into the role of Cable Asset Investment Engineer which really kick started my career. Since then I've held a number of positions and climbed the career progression ladder at every opportunity. Working across different roles and managing large teams meant I was ready to take on this new challenge as Sustainability Manager."

NIE Networks is leading the way in connecting renewable generation to its network and as an organisation they are also striving to reduce their own energy consumption and have appointed Judy to devise and implement a Sustainability Action Plan.

"I have an opportunity to put my stamp on the future of this aspect of the business for NIE Networks. The important thing is that we are doing what we are asking other people to do and can be shown to



be leading the way. We are playing a fundamental role in responding to the climate emergency and putting in place the solutions needed for a green recovery. It's a great opportunity for me at this stage in my career to be part of a campaign that is putting behavioural change at the forefront of people's minds, allowing them to be more mindful in their choices.

"We are looking at everything from the efficiency of our buildings to changes to our fleet and supply chain. Paper reduction, waste recycling and how we can give back to the environment. Last year for example we picked up the Platinum award at the Northern Ireland Environmental Benchmarking Survey for the third consecutive year and we continue to lead the way in the industry, having been the only utility to have received the Platinum accolade.

The headline target was that Northern Ireland would hit 40% from renewable sources by 2020. Northern Ireland actually achieved that target well within the

time frame and is now at 45%, putting the region ahead of GB and the Republic of Ireland. So what was the key to success and setting Northern Ireland apart from the rest?

“There were incentives to customers for connecting renewable generation and NIE Networks played the central role in enabling those connections with over 23,000 customers in Northern Ireland now generating energy from renewable sources – a significant shift from the historic position of having three main centralised power stations. We’ve enabled the network to deal with that, control it and monitor it.”

With the company always looking to the future and how to adapt, the unexpected situation of the coronavirus pandemic and subsequent lockdown restrictions saw NIE Network staff working from home and adapting new behaviours in their day-to-day routine. Although the pandemic brought challenges Judy believes the restrictions played a fundamental role in kick starting the organisation’s sustainability measures.

“The reduction in mileage, unnecessary travel and working from office buildings, are all contributing to our target to reduce our business carbon footprint. With the COVID-19 crisis leading to a worldwide lockdown we had to adapt, and in terms of our sustainability targets we have benefited from the slow down. We have realised energy reductions targets in the last four months that superseded anything that we were expecting. I want to make sure we are working in the right direction and we don’t lose the strides we’ve made in recent months.

“Coronavirus was a catalyst for us embracing a new way of working – one we have now become accustomed to. I don’t think we could have made as many inroads as quickly as we did without that forcing our hand to do it. It is about breaking that chain of thought, which Covid has taught us that we can do. We would be amiss if we didn’t learn from this experience.”

As Judy gets to grips with her new role and sets out the new framework and strategies for sustainability targets, she is also still focused on mentoring those coming through the industry behind her and encouraging others to consider an engineering career. NIE Networks recognises there is a shortage of skills within the electrical engineering industry, particularly amongst females, and are striving to increase awareness of STEM subjects and of the careers on offer within the energy sector. Although Judy acknowledges she is a minority in the field, it has never held her back and she encourages others to do the same.

“Growing up I never saw it as a ‘man’s job’. I just knew that my dad was an electrical engineer, I was interested in what he did, and there were never any barriers to me from a personal perspective. It was a natural transition for me and I would encourage people to recognise it’s an industry for everyone and it will thrive on diversity. NIE Networks has afforded me an opportunity that I maybe wouldn’t have found elsewhere. They share the same underlying values as I do, that your performance should speak for itself and if you perform well, there is no reason why anything else should hinder your growth. “Saving our environment and our planet has grown to be one of the most critical aspects of our future and I’m working at the heart of that. For anyone reading this who wants to be part of that too, customer or future engineer, the opportunity is there for the taking.”



Multimillion pound blueprint to boost reliability of power supplies

UK Power Networks has launched a £6.4million blueprint to use cutting-edge technology including Artificial Intelligence to deliver the most reliable power supplies ever across London, the South and East of England.

The company, which distributes power to 8.3m homes and businesses, is starting a portfolio of 11 projects to trial new uses for AI, test new technologies and provide operational engineers with new equipment to take its service to the next level.

These new projects will build on the company's continued efforts to reduce the frequency and duration of power cuts. From 2011-19 the network operator almost halved the number of power cuts, meaning people only experience a power cut once every three years, on average. Supplies are 99.9% reliable.

The projects all test innovative technologies to either predict power cuts before they happen, or give engineers more information about faults when they happen – so they can fix problems quicker. They include:

- Installing 16 'fault anticipation' devices at seven electricity substations in Suffolk, Sussex, Kent and London. The devices detect, qualify and alert in real time electrical disturbances on overhead lines and underground cables. This alerts engineers to a potential fault so they can get a head start and fix problems proactively.
- Using software built with the British Geological Survey and the Met Office that factors in rainfall, cable density and soil characteristics to create a 'heat map' of where faults could arise a few days into the future. This will allow engineers to prepare and react to faults more quickly.
- Testing new 'fault passage indicators' that automatically communicate to engineers where an electrical circuit might be damaged or obstructed, for example by fallen branches during a storm. It could mean engineers can locate a damage site 80% quicker without physically walking lines.

- Trialling a new smart data algorithm in the MILES project, running to 2023. The system uses computer software connected to a series of sensors to show engineers a fault location within just a few metres.

Ian Cameron, head of customer services and innovation, said: "It's critical we fund research and develop tools for our Net Zero carbon future, but we're also determined to deliver benefits for our customers here and now. People rightly expect us to lead the way in reliability, safety and customer service at the lowest possible cost, and that's just what we're aiming to do with these projects."

Dr. Federico Coffele, research and development director at the Power Networks Demonstration Centre (PNDC), an industrial research centre as part of the University of Strathclyde which works closely with the DNO on several projects, said:

"The PNDC continues to work closely with our partners UK Power Networks, alongside other distribution network operators, in order to accelerate the adoption of new solutions in a range of innovation areas.

"This has included the application of PNDC capabilities within validation of hardware and software, next generation communications, and system integration so to ensure solutions are ready for field deployment. We look forward to supporting UK Power Networks in their efforts to improve network reliability, while delivering a system which will support the delivery of a Net Zero future."

UK Power Networks' innovation projects are primarily funded by energy regulator Ofgem's Network Innovation Competition, and Network Innovation Allowance. For more details see [Innovation Strategy](#) or visit [innovation website](#).



Online learning from NEA Training



Online learning is a flexible, efficient and effective learning method that many organisations are now opting for.

NEA offers a range of online learning products relating to fuel poverty, energy efficiency, health and fuel bill management.

Why choose NEA online learning?

- **Save time and money** – no need to travel to a training centre as learners can study wherever is convenient to them, reducing travel time and costs. Research shows that online learning generally takes around 25% less time than a classroom-based training course.
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- **Highly effective** – get the same message across to all of your staff

For more information contact lynsey.thompson@nea.org.uk
or visit www.nea-training.co.uk/e-learning-solutions/