

# NEA Focus

MAGAZINE

Issue 27 | Spring 2020



## OUR 2020 HEAT HEROES!

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# Coronavirus/COVID-19

## Statement from our Chief Executive

It is hard to watch committed professionals put the interests of others over their own while you set up your 'home office'. Over coming months there will be even deeper, but still insufficient, reservoirs of respect and awe for those who will support the sick and vulnerable over the coming months.

Last week NEA took the inevitable decision to pause all of our face-to-face work with fuel poor and vulnerable households. That work meant sitting with people and filling out tortuous benefit forms, clearing years of accumulated stuff from the houses of chronic hoarders so heating systems can be put in, helping people put their lives back together in a warm and safe home and generally giving desperate people some of the necessary conditions for a decent life.



Pausing this work, even if temporarily, is difficult to accept. Everyone at NEA is working remotely and we continue the majority of our operations, including operating our Warm and Safe Homes Advice Telephone Service and providing training via e-learning. But I would be twisting the truth if I didn't say that we will count the hours and minutes until we are able to engage those in greatest need where they live and where they need it most.

The speed and efficiency with which a small, national charity like NEA has been able to set up, engage and adapt to complete remote working has been remarkable, but no surprise at all. To our partners, members and supporters; quarantine, but don't cocoon. Everyone at NEA is working and wants to use this time to think harder and fresher about what we can do to tackle fuel poverty, in all circumstances. We would like to do this with you. So please, can we keep talking.

From everyone at NEA, please keep yourself safe, but please do what you can for your neighbours and your community.

Adam Scorer  
Chief Executive

# Coronavirus/COVID-19

## Update on delivery and operations

At NEA our priority is to ensure that everyone is able to live in a warm home. This remains important, particularly when people may be spending more time at home or facing uncertainties regarding income. However we also do not want to put anyone at unnecessary risk.

We are closely monitoring the current situation regarding COVID-19/coronavirus and following the latest government advice. This means that we will be making some temporary alterations to how we deliver our work, including cancelling events and pausing face-to-face contact. Our staff are also now working from home. We are however able to continue the majority of our operations, including operating our **Warm and Safe Homes Advice Telephone Service** and providing training via e-learning. Our policy and campaigns work continues, including seeking urgent clarification on extra protections available for vulnerable energy consumers during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Further guidance is below. We'll keep this page updated, and we'll also be sharing updates on our social media pages:

- Twitter: [www.twitter.com/nea\\_ukcharity](https://www.twitter.com/nea_ukcharity)
- Facebook – [www.facebook.com/Nationalenergyaction](https://www.facebook.com/Nationalenergyaction)

### How to contact us

If you need support with your energy bills or advice on which benefits you may be entitled to claim Our **Warm and Safe Homes Advice Service** is still open and able to offer help with issues such as benefits checks/ claims, fuel debt and energy efficiency advice. You can contact us on **0800 304 7159** or via our dedicated Facebook page – [www.facebook.com/WarmSafeAdvice](https://www.facebook.com/WarmSafeAdvice).

### If we are working with you to help any of your clients in fuel poverty

While we will be continuing to operate a phone service as normal, we have made the difficult decision to temporarily limit our face-to-face advice provision to make sure we can properly protect our clients and staff from any risk. We will be working closely with local organisations to support local householders in the community where possible. Please speak to your usual NEA contact, or contact [lesley.tudor-snodin@nea.org.uk](mailto:lesley.tudor-snodin@nea.org.uk) for further information.

### If you have NEA training booked or would like to undertake training

If you have a training course booked please contact our training coordinator, Lynsey Thompson on [lynsey.thompson@nea.org.uk](mailto:lynsey.thompson@nea.org.uk) to discuss this further. If you are currently considering training options then remember that a number of our courses are also available online as e-learning modules. Visit [www.nea-training.co.uk/e-learning-solutions](https://www.nea-training.co.uk/e-learning-solutions) for more information.

### If you would like to contact us for another reason, or to reach an individual member of staff

NEA remains open however most staff are working from home. You can find individual contact details at [www.nea.org.uk/contact-us](https://www.nea.org.uk/contact-us) and would suggest you contact us via email or phone as letters may take some time to be answered.

Purchase invoices or any other financial correspondence should be sent to [finance@nea.org.uk](mailto:finance@nea.org.uk).

# Matt's Policy Update



The changes to our society and the economy due to the COVID-19 outbreak over the last few weeks are unprecedented. New profound impacts of the outbreak are being identified and grappled with daily. At NEA, there have been necessary changes to our ways of working but we are still working hard to make sure that vulnerable energy customers are protected as much as possible during this difficult time. We have also used this time to reflect on what all of this might mean for our policy work going forward.

The 2020 Budget which was delivered just a few weeks ago, already feels irrelevant. The Government has since taken huge steps to support the NHS, the economy and workers in the midst of this public health crisis. Understandably, the Conservative Party manifesto 2019 pledges to invest £9.2bn efficiency within homes, schools and hospitals are not immediate priorities as the Government continue to do what they can to with the immediate public health crisis. We are however continuing our work behind the scenes to ensure these commitments are not forgotten.

There are however some things that need to be addressed more immediately. The need for households to self-isolate has shone a light on some clear gaps in provision for vulnerable customers in the energy market, especially for households who use legacy prepayment energy meters, who could struggle to top up if they are unable to leave the house. We welcomed that the Government obtained agreement with suppliers across the market that extra help will be made available for struggling prepayment customers. They said that "This could include nominating a third party for credit top ups, having a discretionary fund added to their credit, or being sent a pre-loaded top up card so that their supply is not interrupted". This is very much welcome, but there is a need to reduce inconsistency in levels of support provided across suppliers, with some offering to post prepaid cards, and some offering support limited to a third party top up service. In the short term, we are calling on suppliers to do what they can to prioritise the most vulnerable customers when answering calls, providing discretionary top-ups or debt relief. Similarly, NEA have been urging the Government to work with water suppliers to deliver similar forms of assistance, drive up the consistency of support provided to the most vulnerable customers and drive awareness of the support that can be provided in the weeks and months ahead.

Whilst this work will continue, NEA is also considering what this all means in the medium term. Parliament will undoubtedly be out of action for a period, and the wheels of Government will slow down as more policy makers are brought in to the Covid-19 planning operations. All of the consultations and decisions that we have been expecting are liable to be delayed.

But that doesn't mean that we're short of things to do!

Ofgem are consulting on the future of price protection for prepayment metered households. The current situation highlights how important this is. Our response talks about the need for prepayment tariffs to be reflective of the service that is received. For example, based on historic installs, prepayment customers are significantly less likely to be able to upgrade to a smart meter, so we question whether they should pay the same amount for the rollout as a household that is more likely to receive one. We also question whether Ofgem can act to reduce standing charges for prepayment customers so that when they run out of credit their debt rises less quickly, making it easier to get back on supply.

Securing the future of the Warm Home Discount is a clear priority for us in the weeks ahead. Although the legislative timetable will be tight, we need to ensure that the scheme for 2021/2022 goes through the legislature in time. You may have seen our joint campaign with Fair by Design where we set out what we want from the scheme. There may be a need for pragmatism if the parliamentary timetable tightens further.

So, although many areas are now delayed and there will be a hiatus in delivering our business as usual policy priorities, there will still be ample opportunity to deliver our core aim for everyone to be able to live in a warm, safe home. Indeed, it's now even more crucial to help people keep warm and safe in their homes and create a living environment which gives people the best possible chance of recovery. We will continue our collaborative work with our supporters and stakeholders inside and outside Government to help achieve just that.

# Jess' Water Poverty Update



This month marks the completion of the first year of this work programme, and you can feel a change in the levels of awareness of the many issues customers in water poverty face. I've been excited to see conversations about the affordability of water on conference agendas and in various publications, and to see a real focus on supporting those customers struggling to pay in water company business plans during the most recent Ofwat price review, PR19.

The final determinations for PR19 were issued to companies in December 2019, and it's fair to say the companies have been dealt challenging targets. From the perspective of low-income households though, this price review sees a significant reduction in bills across the five-year price control period; the first reductions will be seen from April 2020, where the average annual bill will reduce by around £17, which is the first step to closing the gap between incomes and bill levels for a number of customers on the cusp of financial difficulty. Bill reductions across the board cause issues for companies who are still expected to deliver against difficult targets, and while they offer a glimmer of hope for some customers, they could have had significantly more value if reductions were targeted in other ways. Although four of the 17 water companies have now appealed to the CMA against their final determinations, the remainder are starting to work out how they deliver against the commitments they've made. These commitments vary greatly, but we'll start to see more payment holidays, write-off of arrears, hardship funds and income maximisation across the sector which will be excellent for customers struggling with a wide range of bills. It'll be interesting to watch how the landscape of water poverty starts to change over the next five years.

I attended the dissemination event of the UK Water Industry Research (UKWIR) project to answer the 'Big Question' of 'How do we achieve zero customers in water poverty by 2030?'. I was pleased to see the first phase of the project had similar conclusions to our August 2019 discussion paper on the common measurement of water poverty. Specifically, the need to have a consistent measurement of water poverty, likely to be a bill-to-income ratio (either 3% or 5% of disposable income) and the requirement for a water poverty strategy provided by central government. Having multiple voices making the same recommendations is vital to ensuring we make progress, and I look forward to seeing what UKWIR come up with in the next phase of their research.

We were really pleased to see Luke Pollard MP, Shadow Secretary for State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, highlight that water poverty and personal water use were missing from the Environment Bill during the Second Reading debate in February. The more water poverty is mentioned in the public domain, the more people will be aware of the issue, and the more likely action will be taken to mitigate, or, hopefully, eradicate.

## Impacts of COVID-19

I was thrilled to be asked to speak at the annual Waterwise Conference on March 18th, but unfortunately, and rightly so, the conference was postponed due to the Covid-19 crisis. The conference theme was due to be 'Climate Emergency', and they were keen on ensuring that water affordability and safeguarding of low-income households were considered alongside how water efficiency measures can positively impact the climate crisis. Although Waterwise hope to reschedule the conference for later in the year, I'll be uploading my presentation as a blog on our website (and writing a new one for the new conference date!). So look out for it, and please join in with the conversation!

Our plans to build our parliamentary campaign have also had to be postponed due to Covid-19. We had hoped to be telling you about our parliamentary event, originally planned for June, which would have looked at why water poverty matters in the wider context of poverty, debt and also climate change, and was being sponsored by Alex Davies-Jones MP, co-chair of the APPG for Water. We still hope to hold this event later in the year but will of course ensure this follows all Public Health England guidelines on public gatherings.

**The Covid-19 outbreak is causing a number of people to be concerned. Households who previously haven't experienced financial difficulty may find themselves being challenged more and more as incomes become less certain and their ability to work becomes more difficult. We are seeing promises of support across multiple industries, and communities are banding together to support each other. The water industry is no different. The companies are currently working through what they are able to do to support customers with their bills during this unprecedented situation, and some have already come forward to announce that they are extending their social tariff support schemes for any customers affected by Covid-19. My best advice to you and the people you support is to contact the water company directly to see what they can do if you start to struggle - you won't be alone. And if you're a metered customer, remember to turn the tap off when you're washing your hands. That 20 seconds of water running, multiple times a day, could really make a difference to your water bill.**

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

Follow her on twitter - [@JessCook\\_NEA](#)

# CELEBRATING OUR NA

It was celebration time this January as 14 people were named national 'Heat Heroes' for the work they are doing to tackle fuel poverty in the UK.

The Heat Heroes Awards recognise individuals who have made a significant contribution to helping people living in fuel poverty in their local community, either at work or in voluntary activities. They are supported by the four gas distribution networks: SGN, Wales & West Utilities, Cadent and Northern Gas Networks.

Winners attended a ceremony in the House of Commons where they had the opportunity to meet with MPs representing the constituencies in which they work. The quality of applicants was so high that an additional three people were also chosen to receive 'highly commended' awards. NEA business supporters and other stakeholders also joined in the celebrations.

Adam Scorer, Chief Executive of NEA said: "Across the country our Heat Heroes are working day in, day out to make a difference to those living in fuel poverty. For some, that's by providing direct advice to householders in need. For others, it's being the driving force behind projects that help tackle cold homes, or ensuring fuel poverty outcomes are adopted at strategic level. All of them are making people's lives better and healthier."

It has been a privilege to meet them and learn more about their work, and I commend them for their commitment to bringing affordable warmth for all."

## The 2019-20 Heat Heroes are:

- Sophia Reid, Energy Caseworker at Citizens Advice County Durham
- Dr. Jonathan Smith, GP at Silverdale Family Practice
- Hala Alasaly, Support and Progressions Assistant at Your Homes Newcastle
- Jake Ellis, Energy Adviser at Plymouth Energy Community
- Karis Price, Lead Community Worker – Healthy Homes Healthy People at Warm Wales
- Tara Bowers – Project Coordinator at Exeter Community Energy
- Laura Wicks, Account Manager at SGN
- Paula Hilton, Repairs and Contracts Manager at Arun District Council
- Amanda Martin, Climate Change and Energy Conservation Officer at Dover District Council
- Sandra Woodfall, Environmental Promotions Officer at Dartford Borough Council
- Leanne Elsworthy, Public Health Officer at Wigan Council
- Edward Leddy Owen, Home Improvement Co-ordinator at the Joint Environmental Health Service at Bolsover District and North East Derbyshire District Council
- Emma Blackburn, Project Coordinator at YES Energy Solutions
- Maria Wardrobe, former Director of Communications and External Relations at NEA
- Helen Richmond (highly commended), Energy & Home Support Support Officer at Newark and Sherwood District Council
- Janine Grunchy (highly commended), Sustainability Officer at Broadland District Council and South Norfolk Council
- Wendy Collas (highly commended), Executive Assistant at Warfield Park

# NATIONAL HEAT HEROES



# THE NATION'S BIGGEST HOUSEWARMING

The Nation's Biggest Housewarming is NEA's annual winter campaign raising fuel poverty awareness and developing and progressing solutions to improve access to energy efficiency advice products and services.

This year NEA's Nation's Biggest Housewarming campaign took place on Wednesday 5th February 2020. We invited various organisations to take part in the event and over 50 organisations across the UK joined us including; energy companies, local authorities and community groups. The money raised through this event will enable NEA to deliver projects and to campaign for homes which are warmer, healthier and affordable to heat. We are a small charity with a wide reach and an even bigger vision. We have direct links to fuel poor and local communities and have an expert ability to translate individual circumstances and issues into a framework for government and other agency strategic action. With your support through this event we can continue to work with you to eradicate fuel poverty.

"I find myself not eating at all just to keep it [the heating] on and keep the house warm. I can go a couple of days without eating."





With fuel poverty statistics soaring across the UK, NEA is determined now more than ever to act. The housewarming event raises awareness of the impacts of fuel poverty alongside raising funds to help us continue to deliver projects, campaigning for, and supporting those in need.

Each year we ask for your help in raising the much-needed funds to support this growing and pressing issue of fuel poverty. Whether you raised £5 or £5,000 this year, your donations will help change the lives of those in fuel poverty and assist others to continue to support those in need. This year we saw a range of events from the classic bake sale, cooking challenges, wear your pyjamas to work day and even a chocolate housebuilding competition. Very soon we will be announcing the winner of the prize draw for all of those who took part and they will receive a hamper of goodies from Ringtons. Good luck to all!

We are still collecting donations so please continue to send these in online using our Virgin Money Giving page. You can also donate via BACS or cheque, for further information or help submitting your collections please contact [alice.dalgleish@nea.org.uk](mailto:alice.dalgleish@nea.org.uk)

We hope you enjoyed The Nation's Biggest Housewarming 2020 and if you still have photos or videos of your event that you'd like to share please send them to [alice.dalgleish@nea.org.uk](mailto:alice.dalgleish@nea.org.uk)

Finally, we would like to take this time to thank all of our members and organisations who hosted a housewarming event this year and to anyone who has donated towards the campaign. Your support is integral to our fight to end fuel poverty and we are not only incredibly grateful for your time and effort towards the event but also proud to have you as an NEA member and supporter.



# AGILITY ECO RESPONDS TO CONSULTATION ON FUTURE HOMES STANDARD



Gearoid Lane, Chief Executive, AgilityEco

We recently responded to the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) consultation on the Future Homes Standard (<https://bit.ly/3cNCsJt>). This consultation sets out MHCLG's proposed options to increase the energy efficiency requirements for new homes in 2020. The Future Homes Standard will require new build homes to be future-proofed with low carbon heating and higher levels of energy efficiency, and it will be introduced by 2025.

Delivering the government's legally binding commitment to net zero carbon by 2050 is going to be very challenging, particularly in producing and transporting sufficient zero carbon energy to meet the nation's electrical and transport demands. It is therefore imperative that we minimise the demand for energy to heat new homes. We would characterise the approach taken by MHCLG in the consultation as aiming well below what is commercially feasible on building fabric and assuming instead that heat pumps, powered by zero carbon electricity, will take up the strain in delivering net zero for new homes.

We believe it is completely wrong for MHCLG to jump to the conclusion that the universal answer for new build is heat pumps in the absence of government producing its

Heat Strategy. There is an increasing weight of opinion that a hybrid solution to zero carbon heat, with regional/local solutions involving electricity, heat networks and zero carbon gas, is the better solution to decarbonisation. See for instance the recent report that the Energy Networks Association commissioned (<https://bit.ly/2IB65Q8>).

Notwithstanding what may emerge from the government's Heat Strategy, it is clear that the challenge of decarbonising electricity is huge. Progress on decarbonising the current 300tWh of electricity has stalled at just over the 50% mark in the last two years but, with the retirement of nuclear capacity planned over the next few years, that trend will need to be reversed and progress accelerated. That is before we add in any incremental requirements for transport and heat pumps, the need for energy storage to deal with increased intermittency as well as the associated electricity grid reinforcements. These are massive costs.

We would therefore suggest that even if heat pumps are the solution, MHCLG should assume that the total system cost of increased electricity demand should be taken into account before aiming for anything less than maximum building fabric efficiency. It seems to us very likely that the high marginal cost of additional generation (particularly for the peaks associated with electricity for domestic heat) would be sufficiently large to justify significant investment in fabric efficiency rather than following an artificial trade off with heat pumps. Our strong view is that if MHCLG are aiming for anything short of the best commercially available technologies and products for building fabric, then MHCLG must carry out an analysis of the costs that this will be storing up for the future.

# Leicestershire County Council joins forces with E.ON and Age UK to improve heating in 500 homes across the region

Leicestershire County Council is working with E.ON and Age UK to help people across Leicestershire improve the heating of their homes by installing 500 first-time gas central heating systems in eligible residents' homes.

The Leicestershire Warm Homes Fund Project follows a successful funding bid by the county council to the Warm Homes Fund, established by National Grid, and community interest company Affordable Warmth Solutions, who administer the fund on behalf of National Grid.

In addition to the first-time gas central heating, eligible residents may be able to receive free insulation measures for their homes and can also benefit from free energy efficiency advice and support on how to better manage their income from Age UK Leicester Shire & Rutland.

Residents must meet certain criteria to be eligible and they do not have to be an E.ON customer to benefit. The project is due to launch in early spring 2020.

Lee Breckon, county council cabinet member for health, said: "We are committed as a council to tackling fuel poverty and another real benefit of this agreement is that it doesn't affect the budget within our warm homes service."

Nigel Dewbery, Director of E.ON's obligation delivery and installation services business, said: "We're really pleased to be working with Leicestershire County Council to improve housing across the region.

"Around 4 million UK households are in fuel poverty and unable to heat their home to the temperature needed to stay warm and healthy. Schemes like this one have been designed to tackle the issue by providing free gas connections and first-time central heating systems to those who are eligible across the county.

"This will not only ensure residents are saving money on their heating bills but further demonstrates our commitment as an energy company to support the UK's actions to clean the air by reducing carbon emissions and the impact we all have on the environment."



Jeremy Nesbitt, Managing Director of Affordable Warmth Solutions, said: "We are excited about this investment from National Grid and are delighted to support Leicestershire County Council and its partners to fund the scheme to address fuel poverty across the region.

"Solving the issues associated with fuel poverty continues to challenge many of our stakeholders and the feedback we've already received provides evidence of how the Warm Homes Fund will make a positive difference to thousands of homes throughout Great Britain."

Over the past two years, the Warm Homes Service, which is part of the Public Health Department has provided more than 3,700 Leicestershire households with free, impartial advice to help them stay warm at home and keep their energy bills down.

Many of these households have benefited from support to switch energy supplier. On average these households have saved £233 a year, with the highest saving for a single household being £1,341 a year.

In addition, over 1,900 referrals have been made to access grants, benefits, energy discounts and related services to help make heating homes more affordable, easier to manage and safe.

For warm homes advice or to register interest in the Warm Homes Fund offer please call the First Contact Plus advice and signposting service on **0116 305 4286** or visit [www.leicestershire.gov.uk/warm-homes-fund](http://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/warm-homes-fund)

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NATIONAL SPONSORS

## FOOTPRINT TRUST WINS SOUTH EAST REGIONAL ENERGY EFFICIENCY AWARD

The Isle of Wight Footprint Trust has won the 2020 Vulnerable Customer Support Campaigner of the Year accolade in the regional Energy Efficiency Awards.

Speaking about the award, Ray Harrington-Vail, the general manager of the charity said: "Our clients are people in fuel poverty living on the Isle of Wight, one of the highest areas of poverty in the South East, at around 11%. The island has a higher than average number of older people, many of which are vulnerable. This is coupled by high levels of child poverty at around 30%. Higher than average amounts of illiteracy and innumeracy is also an issue. Much of the housing stock is old and poorly insulated."

The Footprint Trust charity has been helping fuel poor people on the Isle of Wight since 2003. This has been achieved through a number of projects, offering tailored guidance and information.

The Trust has received the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service 2013, for innovative work helping the community and it is also the recipient of the NEA Inclusivity Award 2018, and has two Big Energy Saving Network energy champions among its staff.

The reason why the Trust came top in the award was due to their work in lifting people out of fuel poverty and providing several key services which are not provided or funded by the local authority. Their 'Monergy' workshops deliver fun, informal workshops which educate people about the amount of energy and water used in their homes. These offer skills to understand and manage bills and help people to take control of their household management and avoid debt and use energy more wisely. For those who need further support, the Trust offers tailored home visits where they look at saving energy, money and keeping people warm. The Trust often speaks directly to energy companies to secure debt mediation, grants, discounts and affordable tariffs, and it also applies for grant funding for appliances, insulation and boilers.

Their staff visit around 600 people per year across the Isle of Wight and deliver support to around 2,000 at events and over the phone. Over the past year they have identified savings of over £100,000 for people living in fuel poverty on the Isle of Wight.

"To help people who are in need of greater support, we offer a free home visit" says Ray. "The impact of a home visit can be life changing. We visited a gentleman recently who is elderly and has dementia. He had lost all of his paperwork. We made some calls and discovered that he had been put on the wrong tariff many years earlier and had been paying a high direct debit for some time. As his bills were high, he had not been turning on his central heating and was living in the cold. After we questioned his payments and took a meter reading, his energy company calculated that he had overpaid by £7,000 and we are working on securing this refund to him."

In order to target support to those who are most vulnerable such as young parents, elderly people, those in poverty and with long-term physical and mental health conditions, they deliver 'Monergy' workshops to various groups.

A parent that attended the Footprint Trust Monergy session held at Ventnor Children's Centre said: "As a result of attending the 'Monergy' meeting at the Children's Centre I have now been assisted by the Footprint Trust with my energy bills and am saving £100 per month. This has changed my life so much for the better and I am really very grateful to the Children's Centre for inviting me"

Another parent said: "Thank you for inviting me, I attended the workshop and found it interesting. I agreed to a home visit from the Footprint Trust and was amazed at how helpful they were. One bit of advice was not to leave the microwave on which has a clock, as this will save me £30-£40 per year. I also put foil behind my radiators to stop the heat from going into the walls. I was also provided with a new cooker as the last one was very unsafe."

Ray, who is also an NEA Heat Hero, said: "The staff at the Trust work tirelessly to help some of the most vulnerable in our community, this award is great news and a justified award for them."

To get help with energy and water bills please contact the Trust at [info@footprint-trust.co.uk](mailto:info@footprint-trust.co.uk) or call **01983 822282**.

## HELPING ASHFIELD GET MORE ENERGY EFFICIENT

**Citizens Advice Ashfield are announcing they have secured two years funding from the Energy Redress Scheme run by the Energy Saving Trust to help vulnerable people in Ashfield become more fuel efficient and avoid fuel poverty.**

Working with Ashfield District Council, Citizens Advice will be offering vulnerable residents a full home energy assessment including home visits and help with applying for energy saving grants and switching to the best deals in the market. Citizens Advice will be employing an energy efficiency officer who will be arranging individual appointments for clients and promoting the service around the district with other charities and service providers.

The project, which commenced in March, is titled 'Ashfield Energy Efficiency' and has its own website and dedicated service and appointments at their Kirkby Offices.

Kathryn Stacey CEO at Citizens Advice Ashfield said: "We are delighted to have secured the funding to deliver this project; we often see many clients through our debt service who would benefit from an energy assessment,

yet have never had the ability to deliver this.

"Working with the council's housing teams in identifying and accessing some of the most vulnerable clients in the private rented sector will be a key focus of the project. We will also be providing home visits to those residents who suffer from mobility and isolation problems, particularly in rural areas."

Cllr Tom Hollis, portfolio holder for housing at Ashfield District Council, said: "Ashfield District Council is pleased to be able to support this project by Citizens Advice Ashfield to address the high levels of fuel poverty in the district. Tackling fuel poverty is a key priority for ADC and this initiative will make a real difference to our residents' lives.

"This funding will allow work to continue through agreeing referral protocols. It will enable the council to refer residents who are currently being supported by our affordable warmth team and housing officers, to the new energy efficiency officer."

For further details on the scheme contact [energy@ashfieldca.org.uk](mailto:energy@ashfieldca.org.uk) or call **01623 784657**.



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## Maria's lifetime achievement!

We're delighted to announce that Maria Wardrobe, former Director of Communications and External Relations at NEA has been presented with a lifetime achievement award at this year's Glass Slipper Awards. The awards were organised by The Chronicle Sunshine Fund and were announced at the Hilton NewcastleGateshead on Friday 28 February 2020. The awards salute the work of a remarkable woman who, over her lifetime, has made a considerable and lasting contribution to the North East through her actions, deeds, and great accomplishments.

Maria worked at NEA for 27 years in several roles with her final role as Director of Communications and External Relations. She has led regional and national campaigns, including NEA's annual Warm and Safe Homes Campaign, and has spoken passionately about the terrible impact of fuel poverty on national radio and TV. Maria consistently brought leadership from the energy, voluntary and political sectors together, creating and driving real solutions to the cold homes crisis through parliamentary events; leading the secretariat for the All-Party Parliamentary Fuel Poverty & Energy Efficiency Group; and working with major suppliers. She helped to revolutionise the way NEA brings attention to the issue of fuel poverty, demonstrating a zeal for the cause and consistently bringing public and political attention to an issue which had previously not been acknowledged.

Despite 'retiring' Maria will continue to be a fundamental part of NEA as she joins the Board of Trustees from April 2020.

# Free gas connections?

Tackling fuel poverty together by supporting low-income and vulnerable households to connect to our gas networks

Whether you're a local authority, housing association, social or private landlord or home owner with existing property, then we may be able to help.

The Ofgem-regulated Fuel Poor Network Extension Scheme can reduce fuel bills and improve the energy efficiency rating of your property by supporting connection to the gas network. The scheme, operated by each of the UK's four distribution networks, can provide free or discounted gas connections to households who meet specific criteria.

## Qualifying criteria (one or more apply):

- Be in fuel poverty based on the latest government definition/indicator for the relevant area; or
- Be eligible for support under ECO, including Local Authority Flexible Eligibility under a published Statement of Intent; or
- Nest (in Wales only) or the Home Energy Efficiency Programmes (HEEPs) (in Scotland only)

To find out how to access the scheme for your property contact:

Cadent

0121 592 0181

[www.affordablewarmthsolutions.org.uk](http://www.affordablewarmthsolutions.org.uk)

SGN

0800 015 5174 to speak to a

Help to Heat advisor

[www.sgn.co.uk/HelpToHeat](http://www.sgn.co.uk/HelpToHeat)

Northern Gas Networks

0113 272 7330

[www.northerngasnetworks.co.uk/warm-and-informed](http://www.northerngasnetworks.co.uk/warm-and-informed)

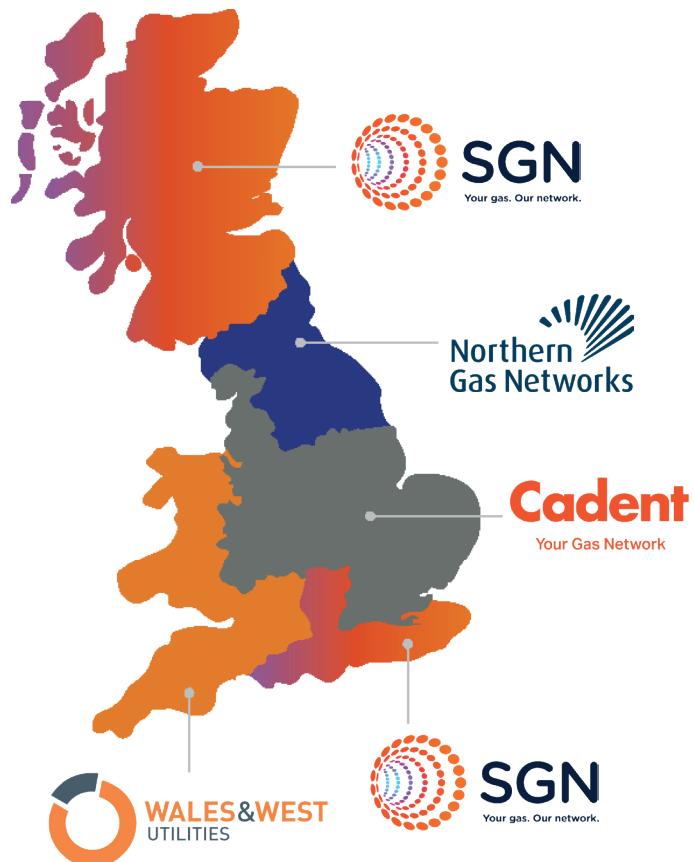
Wales & West Utilities

0800 912 2999

[www.wwutilities.co.uk/services/gas-connections/warm-home-assistance](http://www.wwutilities.co.uk/services/gas-connections/warm-home-assistance)



Do you know who your gas distribution network operator is?



# Living with the lights off



*Paul Walmsley, Energy Relationship Manager, Christians Against Poverty*

**Most of us leave work and come back to a warm home, cook food for our families and enjoy hot water without thinking about it – and in the UK in 2020, that is how it should be. Yet, for many families, even these basic living needs are simply not achievable.**

**Christians Against Poverty (CAP) is a national debt counselling charity, supporting people in debt and poverty. Our free service operates using a home-visiting model, meaning that every day we are walking into homes for the first time and seeing the destitution families face for ourselves.**

**In February 2020, we released a report *A dark place*, a culmination of a survey of over 1000 CAP clients and several focus groups around different parts of the UK. The findings are challenging. More than half (55%) of those surveyed have regularly lived in the cold in the last two years in order to pay for other basics such as food. Three in ten do this every week.**

**When we first met John, a CAP client, he had been trying to survive for 11 years. Struggling through relationship breakdown, addiction and benefit overpayment deductions, John was unable to keep up with his living costs.**

**John told us that all these difficulties had left him in a dark place in every sense of the word, and that is why we have called this report *A Dark Place* to reflect the struggles people are living with.**

**"When the meter runs out, you just have to manage. You sit there. It's an awful time when you can't get electric, you can't have the lights on. Never mind the TV and the radio. It feels black, it is black and it feels dark. It's not nice."**

**For people like John, there is no choice involved: they simply cannot afford those basic living needs. In a world where climate change and net-zero emissions are high on the agenda, we cannot leave behind those for whom energy is simply not affordable. In our report we are calling on the government and industry to look again at the fuel poor and those on low incomes.**

**You can read *A Dark Place* by going to [capuk.org/adarkplace](http://capuk.org/adarkplace)**

# Let's clear the air together

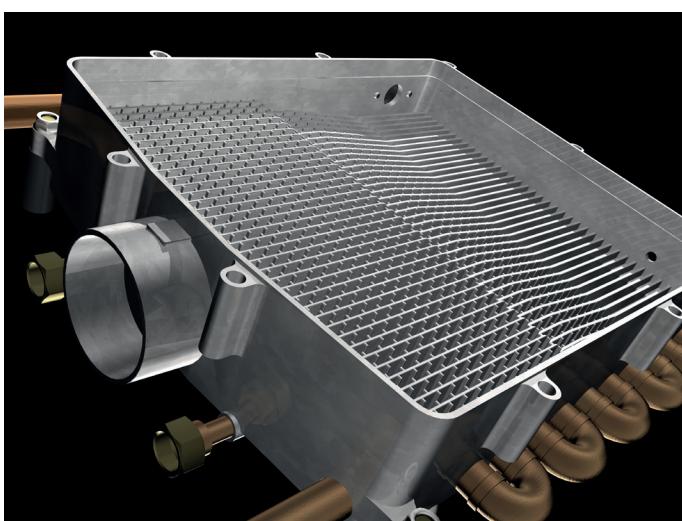
**Stephen Zouch, Managing Director of Intergas, is on a mission to reduce the company's carbon footprint while supporting households using gas to heat their homes.**

It's been clear to most of us for years that whatever we've been doing to reduce pollution, it's not enough and, if we didn't know it, Greta drew our attention to it. Now more than ever before, we - households, transport providers, businesses, governments - need to be pushing ourselves and our organisations to help negate our own impact on the environment. For boiler manufacturers like us, decarbonising home heating is the undeniable imperative and we're working on it. Most of us have developed smart hybrid systems that switch between renewable and traditional heat sources to maximise efficiency and reduce CO2 emissions. We cannot, though, ignore the fact that 85% of households in the UK use gas to heat their homes, and we need to support them. Replacing their boilers with heat pumps or networks of hot water pipes, recommended by the Committee on Climate Change, is not going to be fast or easy to adopt (even if they could afford it), not least because the infrastructure to enable the wholesale use of electricity is nowhere near ready. But the environment won't wait, so we must make sure that when households come to replace their gas boilers with another, that boiler is the most efficient, installed in a property that has all the necessary insulation to avoid wasting energy and incurring unnecessarily high fuel bills.



It's strange but true that not all condensing boilers are equally efficient. Take the Intergas boiler for example; it's the only domestic boiler with a bithermic heat exchanger which means the heat and hot water can reach the required temperature faster, using less energy than any other boiler. It's also incredibly reliable, so there are fewer call-outs and repairs needed. Energy efficiency has always been very close to our hearts and now, working with Rheem, the water and heating solutions manufacturer which acquired Intergas at the end of last May, and has very aggressive carbon reduction targets, we are even more actively involved in reducing our carbon footprint in our factories in Europe, beyond our original targets.

Only by working collaboratively, sharing best practice and implementing energy saving strategies that endure, will any of us be able to play an effective part in clearing the air.



# EUROPEAN SOLUTIONS TO ENERGY POVERTY

William Baker on behalf of STEP UK

'Solutions to Tackle Energy Poverty', STEP, involves consumer organisations from 9 countries working together in a concerted effort to tackle fuel poverty. The project, funded by the European Commission, recently started helping its first clients.

Despite the uncertainties arising from Brexit, the Citizens Advice STEP consortium and its European partners believe we can learn much from each other's experiences of tackling fuel poverty (referred to as 'energy poverty' on the European mainland). While the differences in housing, energy markets, welfare provision and regulatory systems are many, we have three common aims:

1. A commitment to making a difference to our client's lives by providing high quality advice, particularly on energy efficiency, and finding solutions to their problems.
2. Train and support front line workers in regular contact with energy poor households to either provide advice themselves or to refer their clients to us for advice.
3. Make the case for more concerted action against energy poverty from our local authorities, national governments and the European Union itself.

## How are we doing this?

**Develop resources and understanding across the STEP partners**

This phase is now almost complete. We have now:

- produced a common framework for addressing energy poverty across the STEP partner countries
- identified examples of good practice
- carried out a review of national policies
- provided an overview of referral systems
- developed training resources for advice and frontline workers
- agreed an advocacy strategy
- put in place a communication plan.

Our website - [www.stepenergy.eu/en/](http://www.stepenergy.eu/en/) - went live in September and we published our first newsletter in February 2020.

One issue identified through this work was whether countries had an official definition of energy poverty. Only three of the 9 STEP countries had such a definition, although several others had proxies. Even in the case of the UK, which has slightly different definitions in each of the constituent nations, many consider the current Low Income High Costs definition for England has substantial problems. However, the Government's proposed new Low Income Low Energy Efficiency definition, if adopted, represents a significant improvement.

There was universal agreement among the partners that all European countries should adopt a definition and enshrine this in law: this is essential for developing effective policy. We also felt there was a case for a common definition across European countries, although we recognised there were major hurdles, such as lack of good quality comparable data and the difficulties presented by very different housing, energy markets, welfare systems and energy needs.

There is much we can learn from each other. The Citizens Advice STEP consortium, for example, has shared information about the Big Energy Saving Network and Energy Advice Programme, NEA's fuel poverty awareness day and the End Fuel Poverty Coalition's Fuel Poverty Manifesto. STEP partners are keen to develop similar initiatives in their countries.

The work has also highlighted some of the differences between countries. For example, ACE Research, responsible for monitoring the impact of STEP on clients, put much time and effort into designing a questionnaire that would work across all the partner countries. Yet feedback from partners raised such issues as 'what is a bedroom?', 'why isn't there a gas option for cooling systems?', 'what about consumers who pay their distribution company for electricity?', 'what do you mean by non-binary?', 'why not just ask clients what their income is?' (it appears this is only a sensitive issue in the UK).

## Implementation

The three local Citizens Advice taking part in STEP (Reading, Manchester and Coventry) and our European partners recently started delivering energy advice and community workshops to energy poor households and training for front line workers.

The Citizens Advice STEP consortium is responsible for leading the delivery phase across all the STEP partners. This involves checking progress against targets, collecting feedback data from clients and frontline agencies across the nine countries and helping BEUC (the European consumer body and STEP project manager) support any partner having problems.

We will also monitor STEP's impact on clients' health and well-being. Unlike many of our resources that have required translation, we are using the internationally recognised SF-12 health impact tool, for which translated versions already exist. Even so, our Portuguese partner had to substitute certain words when it found the questionnaire was written in Brazilian Portuguese.

And our advocacy work has also begun. For example, we have spelt out the implications of the European Commission's Clean Energy Package for energy poor consumers and have reported this to the Commission. We have agreed on a campaign plan for making sure the Package has a real impact on energy poor consumers in member countries, which includes the UK until the transition period ends on 31 December. And we have published our first set of policy recommendations which we want all policy makers to adopt to ensure effective action against energy poverty.

## Next steps

The delivery phase of the project will run for another 18 months. Following this, we will assemble all the data gathered, make sure the experiences of the 9 consumer organisations are fully captured and reported upon and then use our work to inform good practice at the local, national and European level. But we recognise that advice, no matter how effective, can only go so far - we also need policies and programmes that can make a real difference to people's lives.

This is where the advocacy element of STEP comes in. Ending energy poverty requires action on many fronts, including energy efficiency, energy market regulation, housing supply and welfare. Few, if any, countries can claim to have put the necessary cross sector strategy in place.

STEP will collect good quality evidence on the impact of our work with energy poor households. However, we suspect that despite advice many will still struggle to afford their energy bills. We would then like to model what more is required, particularly with respect to improving home energy standards, to completely remove all our clients from energy poverty. And then use this evidence to make the case to politicians and others to take action to end the misery of energy poverty once and for all.

Please sign up to the STEP newsletter for updates on the project, available at: [www.stepenergy.eu/en/news-step-project-uk](http://www.stepenergy.eu/en/news-step-project-uk)

- Choosing to eat or heat your home
- Fearing what the postman may bring
- Being petrified to open your front door as it may be a bailiff
- Feeling hopeless, embarrassed, guilty, stressed
- Suffering anxiety & depression caused by continuous worry
- Considering suicide as the only way out.

Suicide is considered by almost 50% of people struggling with debt in the UK, sadly the burden can just become too much. My advisers are all trained in 'applied suicide intervention skills training' and work with tenants to create a plan that will support their immediate safety.

In my team advice services have increased 100%. The anxiety tenants are suffering about falling behind on bills, and having no family or friends to help, means that mental health conditions are exasperated too. My team work tirelessly to sustain tenancies and alleviate these adverse experiences, whilst providing a direct link between health and social care, welfare and debt. We constantly challenge unscrupulous debt collectors and work with the Department of Work and Pensions to secure correct financial entitlements.

The most important part of my advisers' job is to listen, understand and help our tenants make informed decisions, whilst sustaining their tenancy and family.

I'm extremely proud of the fact in 2018/19 we were the only social landlord that did NOT evict anyone for rent arrears, but we did put £2.5 million pounds in tenants' pockets, and helped 40 tenants find long-term work. We are not 'just a landlord'!

If I've shocked you, I apologise, but when I sit in my warm, cosy home, I pause, to give thought to how lucky I really am.



*Claire Pearce-Crawford is Income and Inclusion Manager at Melin Homes. This blog was originally published in Public Health Network Cymru's e-bulletin*

## THE BURDEN OF DEBT

**Claire Pearce-Crawford of Melin Homes reflects on debt and a month of advice work.**

It's February 2020. It's cold and snow is on the way. As I sit in my warm, cosy home, I pause, to give thought to how lucky I really am: I shall explain why.

I will not bore you with my job title, or how busy I am, as truthfully, none of this matters when it comes to the tragedy my team see on a daily basis of those living with debt. 'In-work poverty' has risen dramatically in Wales with estimations that one in three families are just one pay check away from losing their home.

Much of the story I tell today will take you back to the days of 'The Poor Law', work houses, and desperate hunger, yet its 2020? Right?

What if I told you that in the last month we have supported:

- A lady who was cutting bed sheets up to use as sanitary wear
- A family who sat in their coats at home as they had no heating
- A lady who had terminal cancer, but was still being told to look for work
- A child who had to wait until the next day to eat at breakfast club in school
- A mother who could not afford to buy her baby milk
- A dad who didn't eat for two days, as it was half term (yes, holiday hunger exists)
- A student who considered suicide due to pressure from 'student loans'.

Every one of these families have significant debt issues. Debt isn't just about 'owing money to another person'. It's more than that, it's:

# ONLINE TRAINING FROM NEA

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

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

## 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.

**Flexible** – computer, tablet and smartphone compatible allowing learners to study at their own pace – anywhere and at anytime. Individual and organisational licences are available.

**Fast and convenient** – learning can start as soon as you wish, no need to check diaries or arrange travel etc.

**Highly effective** – get the same message across to all of your staff.



For more information about the online courses available visit  
**[nea-training.co.uk/e-learning-solutions](http://nea-training.co.uk/e-learning-solutions)**

For information about NEA's full suite of training courses visit  
**[nea.org.uk/training](http://nea.org.uk/training)**

To find out more about NEA's training services contact:

Lynsey Thompson, Training Co-ordinator

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Or visit: [www.nea.org.uk/training](http://www.nea.org.uk/training)



*Action for Warm Homes*