

Fuel poverty and local government

Advice for elected members
and their constituents



Background

Wealden and Rother District Councils play an important role in providing activities to alleviate fuel poverty in their areas through their respective Affordable Warmth Strategies.

In addition, as part of Comprehensive Area Assessment from 2008 to 2011 they are required to monitor a national indicator on fuel poverty and report this to government.

At a local level, parish Councillors have a key role to play in this, in being able to help direct constituents to fuel poverty related services.

This booklet, produced by Action in rural Sussex and Rother and Wealden District Councils, aims to help councils by providing relevant information and referral routes.

What is 'fuel poverty'?

A household is generally defined as being in fuel poverty if it needs to spend more than 10% of its income on all household fuel use.

The three main factors affecting fuel poverty are:

- poor energy efficiency of the dwelling
- high price of domestic fuel
- low disposable household income.

Who is affected by fuel poverty?

Groups most likely to be at risk include:

- pensioners living on a small fixed income
- families on low income with very small children
- disabled and chronically sick
- single people on low incomes living in private rented accommodation
- low income households living in traditional housing with solid walls that will be difficult to insulate
- low income households with no access to mains gas.

If fuel prices are high then more people are at risk of fuel poverty.



Fuel poverty can affect people's lives in a variety of ways, but generally leads to debt, ill health, discomfort and misery. Other effects of fuel poverty can include social isolation and underachieving by children living in cold, damp housing.

Excess winter deaths:

Mortality levels are markedly higher in winter months than in the summer. In Winter 2006/07 there were 23,900 more deaths in England and Wales compared to the average level in the non-winter period. There is an established link between excess winter deaths and respiratory and circulatory diseases; therefore it is essential to ensure that indoor temperatures do not fall below 16°C and ideally should be around 19–21°C.

Underachieving:

Those living in fuel poverty sometimes ration their energy usage by limiting the number of rooms they heat. For families, this can lead to children not being able to find a warm, quiet place to study and this could result in them falling behind at school.

Social isolation:

There is anecdotal evidence that people living in cold, damp housing might be embarrassed to invite others to their homes.

Signs of a household in fuel poverty

- Obvious lack of heating and property cold when visited
- obvious use of blankets and electric blankets
- condensation in winter months and black mould
- living in one area or room of the house
- spending more time in public areas such as libraries or buses
- reluctant to have visitors.



Household income

Recent information suggests there may be in excess of £7 billion of unclaimed benefits in the UK. It costs nothing to claim, but people have to make a claim in order to get the money. Getting additional benefits will increase household income but will also increase eligibility to other grants and assistance. If you think one of your constituents may be entitled to more benefits, there is expert help available for this. The organisations listed below are happy to take referrals and offer assistance in making a claim.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) can advise on benefits that your constituents may be entitled to, but not claiming. The rules about benefits sometimes change and it is difficult to keep up to date with all the changes, so it is worth encouraging them to contact the local office of the DWP to check whether they may be missing out on money they may be entitled to.

In Wealden you can contact the Benefits Liaison Officer who can do a benefits check over the phone
Tel: 01323 443774

In Rother you can contact Customer Services
Tel: 01424 787000

Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB)

Applications for claiming benefits can be very complicated and CAB staff can assist with advice and form filling. The CAB also have trained money advisors who can advice on debt issues.

Wealden Citizens Advice

Tel: Crowborough: 01892 655303
Tel: Hailsham: 01323 842336
Tel: Uckfield: 01825 764940

Rother Citizens Advice

Bexhill On Sea:
Tel: 01424 215055 or
Tel: 01424 734549
Bank Chambers, Buckhurst Road
Bexhill On Sea, East Sussex TN40 1QF

The National Debt Helpline

can provide advice on managing debt. They can help you set up a free debt-payment arrangement, called a debt-management plan (DMP)

Tel: 0808 808 4000

Improving the energy efficiency of housing

Improving the energy efficiency of housing can save householders a significant sum of money as well as cutting down on harmful carbon emissions. There are many grants available to help improve the energy efficiency of housing.

Energy Efficiency Grants

Warm Front grants from the Government provide loft and cavity wall insulation, draught-proofing, tank and pipe lagging, low energy light bulbs and energy advice. This grant is available to people on a range of state benefits. For details, contact the Warm Front on: freephone 0800 316 6011.

There are grants and discounts available for home owners and private tenants that include loft and cavity wall insulation and renewables, like solar panels for heating hot water.

For more information and to check eligibility, call one of the numbers below:

East Sussex Energy Partnership

Tel: 0800 980 0901

Energy Savings Trust

Tel: 0800 512 012

You can also visit the Council's websites for details of current offers:

Rother

www.rother.gov.uk/Housing

Wealden

www.wealden.gov.uk/warmhomes

Home Energy Efficiency Hotline:

Tel: 01323 443321

The Solid Fuel Association

provides information about using solid fuel. There are simple improvements which can be made to cut heating costs and tips on how to save energy, as well as advice on how to operate open fires and central heating systems.

Contact the Solid Fuel Association on

Local call rate: 0845 601 4406



Help with fuel costs

Constituents over 60 years old are entitled to an annual, non-means tested, payment of up to £250 to cover the additional burden of fuel costs over the winter period.

Those aged 80 or over could receive up to £400, depending on their circumstances.

Contact the UK Government's Winter Fuel Allowance Helpline for further details.

Local call rate: 08459 15 15 15



People in receipt of certain benefits, such as Pension Credit or Income Support, may be entitled to a Cold Weather Payment to help with their fuel bills. This payment is made automatically when the local average temperature is, or is forecast to be, 0° Celsius or below over seven consecutive days. Payment will be made alongside normal benefit entitlements and will be sent out automatically to those who qualify.

Contact the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) for further information about this: www.dwp.gov.uk

Energy bills and payment methods

There are many ways to pay for gas and electricity and money can be saved by switching to a cheaper payment plan, even with the same supplier.

Monthly Direct Debit

Direct debit spreads the cost of gas and electricity evenly over 12 months, with the same amount deducted from the customer's bank account every month. It is important that the monthly payments are sufficient to cover annual consumption, as under-estimated payments will lead to a debt building up. Most suppliers offer a discount for using this payment method. Some suppliers offer further discounts for online billing.

Quarterly Billing

A wide variety of payment options are available, including cheque and payment at the post office. Paying for fuel after it has been used, however, may cause budgeting problems during winter months when fuel usage will be higher. It is also important that fuel bills are based on actual rather than estimated meter readings to ensure that payments are enough to cover ongoing usage. Be aware that the price per unit for fuel is usually higher with quarterly bills than with direct debit.

Prepayment Meter

The prepayment meter is a 'pay-as-you-go' payment method which helps prevent a debt accumulating. It also enables an outstanding debt to be paid off. People with a fuel debt should discuss an affordable level of repayment with their supplier before the meter is set. This payment method has many disadvantages, including higher rates, inconvenience of visiting payment outlets for payment cards and self-disconnection (having the gas or electricity supply cut off because they are unable to buy payment cards). If somebody with a prepayment meter wishes to change to a different payment method their supplier should replace the meter free of charge.

It is also important to check that anyone taking over a prepayment meter from a previous tenant is aware of the following:

- they will be paying a higher tariff (compared to direct debit or quarterly billing)
- they should check the meter has been cleared of any debt from the previous tenant.

Fuel Direct

This option is available to those in receipt of certain benefits and with a substantial fuel debt. Payment towards fuel usage and fuel debt is deducted direct from benefit payments. The level of debt repayment is usually set much lower than with a prepayment meter and supply is maintained. The local DWP will provide further help and information about Fuel Direct.

Social Tariffs

All energy suppliers offer a variety of schemes/grants and discounts aimed at low income and fuel poor households. Examples include: reduced rate gas and electricity; help with household bills and free energy efficiency measures. Constituents should be advised to contact their own fuel supplier for further information about social tariffs but to also check out other fuel suppliers' offers.

The Home Heat Helpline

If you are not sure that you are on the best payment tariff, it is a good idea to contact the Home Heat Helpline.

You can contact them via a freephone number funded by the energy companies. This takes you directly through to an operator without having to press lots of numbers.

The staff who work there can:

- advise you whether you are on the best tariff with your current supplier
- give advice when you are worried about your bills/debts
- put you through to the right department of your supplier without it costing anything
- give information about the Priority Services Register.

**www.homeheathelpline.org.uk
0800 336699**

Fuel switching

Savings can be made by switching to a cheaper gas and electricity supplier.

Shopping around for the best deals could save people over £100.

For help switching gas or electricity supplier, or identifying the cheapest fuel supplier, contact **uswitch**.

Tel: 0800 404 7908

or log onto **www.uswitch.com**

Understanding fuel bills

Everybody is advised to read and record their gas and electricity meter readings on a regular basis to keep track of how much fuel they are consuming. This will also help prevent a large debit or credit balance building up on their fuel account.

If you are having trouble paying a large bill it is important that you talk to your supplier. They may be able to arrange to spread the payment over a number of months for you.

If you have ongoing energy debts ask your supplier if you qualify for their charitable trusts. This can give one off help to people in fuel debt.

Further help on understanding fuel bills can be provided by local advice agencies, including the Citizens Advice Bureaux.

Problems with gas or electricity supplier?

Constituents should always contact their fuel supplier direct to discuss any problems or disputes.

If they fail to resolve their query, they may contact Consumer Direct for further assistance.

Local call rate: 08454 040506

Safety

If the gas or electricity supply fails, constituents should be advised to contact the supplier using the emergency number on the back of the bill or on their website.

If anyone suspects there is a gas leak, call the National Grid on 0800 11 999

Other services

All gas and electricity suppliers must offer certain free priority services to customers aged over 60 or registered disabled, chronically sick or with sight or hearing difficulties. Contact the fuel supplier direct to find out about eligibility for the Priority Service Register. Free services include:

- a safety check on gas appliances to make sure they are safe and are not giving out harmful carbon monoxide.
- help with reading gas and electricity meters or moving difficult-to-reach meters.
- a password scheme to help protect against bogus callers.
- special controls or adaptors to help make gas and electricity appliances and meters easier to use.
- a bill nominee scheme which enables a relative, friend or carer to help read and check fuel bills.
- special help and advance notice if there is a planned power cut, including the loan of cooking and heating facilities.

Action in rural Sussex (AirS) is a registered charity which was formed in 1931 to serve rural communities. Our major role is to identify problems and respond to the needs of rural communities – providing practical support and helping villages in Sussex remain vibrant living and working places.

www.ruralsussex.org.uk

AirS Registered Charity N° 1035401

Sussex Association of Local Councils (SALC) recognises that fuel poverty is a hidden problem for many rural families and will encourage parish councils to work with appropriate agencies to enable communities to have greater awareness.

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