

Fuel Poverty Select Committee Talk

What is fuel poverty?

Households in fuel poverty are those that spend more than 10% of income on fuel use in order to maintain a satisfactory heating regime i.e. between 18-21 degrees Celsius.

Although the South East and Hampshire in particular do not fare too badly in the national fuel poverty statistics, there are certain groups that may be susceptible and pockets of fuel poverty are not necessarily highlighted by district or county wide statistics.

At Age Concern Hampshire we hear about the effects of fuel poverty from our freephone information and advice line which took over 14,500 calls last year. We also see people face to face through our outreach projects such as our countywide information bus and our information cafes. We also feel that as a trusted organisation for older people, and particularly vulnerable older people, we are in a good position to help deliver solutions on issues such as fuel poverty. The Department for energy and climate change report on fuel poverty 2009 highlighted some statistics with particular relevance to our work with older people.

- fuel poverty was found to be highest amongst single occupancy households where the person was age 60 or over. By 2007 one in five UK single occupancy households aged 60 and over were in fuel poverty.

- fuel poverty in vulnerable households i.e. those containing the elderly, children, disabled or long-term sick had risen to 3.25 million in 2007, an increase of 2.75 from the previous year.

- generally the rise in fuel poverty had been mitigated some what by energy saving measures although not by enough to prevent
 - a) an increase in the number of households in fuel poverty and
 - b) an increase in the number of households not in, but much nearer, the 10% line of fuel poverty.

The effects of fuel poverty

According to the Faculty of Public Health the estimated number of excess deaths in the winter period each year is 40,000. If it is a colder winter than normal, there are a further 8,000 deaths per degree Celsius below the average temperature.

Extremely cold weather can cause mild hypothermia, which increases the risks of some illnesses – including heart attacks, strokes and respiratory disease – and the likelihood of falls.

Therefore, it can only be beneficial to reduce fuel poverty and increase incomes for those who may be vulnerable to these illnesses.

What causes people to be fuel poor?

The key factors affecting fuel poverty were found to be income, fuel bills and fuel consumption. The Department for energy and climate change results indicated that fuel bill increases had had the biggest effect on fuel poverty increases between 2004 and 2007.

Our enquiries and experience at ACH

Older people may be more vulnerable to fuel poverty due to low incomes. Policies such as the increase in VAT may mean that they have less to spend and income has to go further. The highest proportion of calls we receive to our freephone information and advice line are regarding benefits.

Older people are often unaware of benefits available. Getting people to take up the help they are entitled to often opens the door to other help available such as warm front grants for those claiming attendance allowance.

Last year nearly 20% of respondents to our client feedback survey said that they had achieved an increase in income after contacting us.

Fuel bills and consumption can be quite high for a lot of older people as they may tend to spend significant amounts of time at home and so require the heating to be on all day. If mobility is a problem they may feel colder as they can sit for long periods.

They may also be property rich but cash poor – if the family has moved on and maybe a husband or wife has passed away, they may be living in a large property that requires a lot of heating but which has to be paid for from just one income.

Problems highlighted by us and other agencies

Income – lack of information and awareness; older people are often unaware of how to ask about increasing their sources of income.

Many fear that income could go down for example if the Department for Work and Pensions assess them. Pride can be a factor, many older people seem to think that they “don’t deserve” financial help and that “they can manage” by being careful.

We have had calls from worried friends and relatives who are concerned that some elderly people are not keeping their homes warm enough because they are on a tight budget.

We also receive calls from those who are just above the limits for receiving help and benefits and who quite often struggle to pay the fuel bills particularly in a cold winter such as 09/10.

Fuel bills – not easy to understand – lack of clarity on the bills themselves, unable to easily access comparisons – many of which seem to be internet based now.

Fuel bills in sheltered housing i.e. coming through management companies provide another middle man to hide responsibility for fuel price increases.

Recent severe and prolonged bad weather meant that households living on a fine balance started to be unable to cope with the pressures of higher bills.

Fuel consumption – energy saving information and practical solutions are often unknown – perception of energy saving doesn't necessarily mean turning the heating off!

We had lots of calls regarding the boiler scrappage scheme last winter and lots of calls about warm front grants. Warm front grants were subject to delays.

Even if improvements are available there are problems such as getting the loft cleared before insulation can be installed or learning how to work new boilers and heating systems, particularly timer switches, especially when the clocks change.

Initiatives and ideas

Income: better distribution of information regarding general entitlements and specifically cold weather help available. Getting this to them before cold weather events would reduce stress.

Use of trusted organisations such as Age Concern Hampshire to encourage more people to ask for help (rather than the council or Department for Work and Pensions who are sometimes seen in a negative light). However, using a co-ordinated information resource is important to avoid confusion.

Often fuel poverty, indeed any sort of poverty, is highlighted through a different enquiry altogether. Outreach projects good in this respect and people such as Opal volunteers and networks of people e.g. village agents, good neighbours, Community Innovations Teams and Home Improvement Agencies.

Some people may not be claiming benefits e.g. attendance allowance therefore reducing their eligibility for warm front grants etc. Often the initial movement towards getting help such as filling in a warm front grant form or attendance allowance form is seen as too much for a person to cope with (no-one really seems to like filling in forms). This simple act done by an Opal volunteer or Community Innovations Team member could be an easy transition into the help needed to step out of fuel poverty (training in such aspects is important for those on the front line).

Maybe highlight why the extra help is needed – e.g. pensions not rising as much, colder weather than normal? How to market the help i.e. maybe they would accept help for the benefit of someone else (a spouse or even pet??) This is often much easier face to face rather than over the phone or in a leaflet.

Fuel bills: campaign for clearer bills, clearer line of answerability particularly for management companies, better access to comparison information (I.T. centres and courses) Social tariff awareness increased and easier to comprehend. Maybe make it easier for money management such as setting up direct debits which often allow for a reduction in bills. These are all services that could be offered through existing outreach projects.

Fuel consumption – highlight that energy saving help can come from outside initiatives not just “turning the heating off” More access to information on

schemes such as free or subsidised insulation or replacement boiler schemes. Follow up visits to help understand new heating systems after they have been installed – particularly around the time the clocks change. Maybe look at hiring out energy monitors from libraries or through personnel such as Opal volunteers or Community Innovations Team staff. Home visits will often highlight problems especially if staff are trained to spot the signs of inefficient use of heat e.g. mould on the walls could indicate that ventilation is poor rather than a lack of heating, and a simple measure such as opening the trickle vents on the windows could make all the difference.

Conclusion

Although initiatives from above are important i.e. warm front grants and other benefits, they are not fully effective unless they are reaching and helping the people in fuel poverty.

By increasing support through funding and training to front line organisations who already deal with these people, the measures can be targeted and implemented more effectively.

These people can be trained to spot the signs of fuel poverty not highlighted by broader statistics, help people get over any resistance to help that they may have and feedback to other organisations the effectiveness of the measures. In many cases these front line people are often already in place, Opal volunteers are a prime example, it would be relatively straightforward to run a pilot test to see how they could be implemented in reducing fuel poverty.