



St Edmundsbury
BOROUGH COUNCIL

A625

Rural Area Working Party 15 April 2010

St Edmundsbury's Domestic Energy Efficiency and Affordable Warmth Programme

SUMMARY

This report provides background to the Council's work to improve domestic energy efficiency and secure an affordable level of warmth in residents' homes. The Council is committed to improving domestic energy efficiency and achieving affordable warmth in homes across the Borough in accordance with its recently revised Affordable Warmth Strategy (formerly the Council's Fuel Poverty Strategy). The Environment Officer responsible for this area of work will give a short presentation at the meeting reporting on the projects that have been happening and will outline future activity with particular consideration of rural communities as part of our Action Plan supporting the Strategy.

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

The purpose of this report is to update the Working party on the work which is carried out to improve domestic energy efficiency and tackle fuel poverty by securing affordable warmth for residents in the Borough.

The range of activities which form part of the programme throughout the year make a significant contribution to the Council's corporate priorities, in particular around improving the wellbeing of the community. Councillors are invited to make comments and suggestions as to how the programme of activities could be improved in the future and provide feedback about existing activities.

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update the Working Party on the work which is carried out to improve domestic energy efficiency and tackle fuel poverty by securing affordable warmth for residents in the Borough.

2. Background

- 2.1 Fuel poverty occurs when a household is unable to afford to heat their home to the level required for health and comfort. Fuel poverty arises from the combination of fuel prices, low incomes, poorly insulated homes and expensive or inadequate heating systems. A household is said to be in fuel poverty if, in order to maintain a satisfactory heating regime, it would be required to spend more than 10% of its income on all domestic fuel use.
- 2.2 It is now widely recognised that fuel poverty not only damages the well-being of individual households, but also imposes additional costs on the wider community in treating poor health, financial disadvantage and social exclusion.
- 2.3 Local authorities are recognised as one of the most important agencies in the eradication of fuel poverty. Housing issues are paramount in any programme of fuel poverty reduction. But finding solutions to fuel poverty also cuts across many other areas of social policy; for example the promotion of better health and well-being, environmental policy, economic regeneration and the redevelopment of communities. Local authorities are considered to be well placed to broker the kinds of partnerships that can act strategically and have significant impact in these areas.
- 2.4 In response to the requirements of the Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Act 2000, the Council has worked strategically to eradicate fuel poverty. It adopted its latest Affordable Warmth Strategy in December 2009. The Affordable Warmth Strategy contains a wealth of information and data on the characteristics of Borough's housing stock with particular reference to its energy performance (Papers A26 and A359 refer). A copy of the Action Plan which supports the Strategy is presented at Appendix A.

3. Energy efficiency and housing conditions in the Borough

- 3.1 The physical characteristics of dwellings have a major effect on their energy efficiency. The number of exposed external walls and the construction materials and methods all affect the overall heat loss and therefore the energy efficiency. Different types and ages of dwellings will have different energy characteristics.
- 3.3 The variability of heating systems and standards of insulation within the Borough's dwelling stock means that a significant proportion of dwellings need additional insulation, improved heating and draught proofing. Such improvements can lead to a reduction in energy consumption with consequent reduction in the emission of greenhouse gas, Carbon Dioxide.
- 3.4 However, it should be noted that improving energy efficiency does not necessarily equate to a reduction in energy consumption. In the majority of cases there will be a reduction; however, where a household is in fuel poverty and improvements are made, energy consumption may well go up as householders change their behaviour. In such dwellings the occupiers may well have been heating the dwelling to an inadequate level using expensive fuel. Use of cheaper fuels can create affordable warmth, but also lead to increased energy consumption.

- 3.5 There are four factors which cause dwellings to be classified as 'hard to treat' with regard to energy efficiency improvements and two of these are significant in relation to the housing stock in the Borough:-
- Solid wall construction; and
 - Access to mains gas supply network.

These two factors are particular features of the rural communities in the Borough.

4. Energy Efficiency and Households

- 4.1 Energy prices are a key driver of fuel poverty and the households on the lowest incomes are required to make decisions between expenditure on fuel or other essential items. Over the last ten years, real domestic energy prices have risen by 11% for electricity, coal and smokeless fuels by 23%, gas by 42%, and heating oils by 74% (2008 data).
- 4.2 Very often those on low incomes live in the oldest and least efficient housing. Under occupation is also a factor contributing to fuel poverty, especially for older owner-occupiers.
- 4.3 The cheapest heating systems to buy and install are generally the most expensive to run. The situation is made worse especially for low income households who pay for fuel on pre-payment meters. This is because generally pre-payment meter tariffs are higher than other forms of payment. The progressive increase in energy prices has therefore pushed more people into fuel poverty.
- 4.4 Some households also have a greater requirement for heat and hot water than the average household because they spend longer periods of time at home. This might include those households with older people, those with long-term illness or disabilities, the unemployed or young children. These households tend to be on lower incomes, although not necessarily on benefit, and at the same time may have less access to money to invest in energy efficiency improvements to their homes or appliances.

5. Key areas of work for the Borough

- 5.1 There are three areas where our work is focussed:-

(i) Maximising household income

Given that low income is one of the main causes of fuel poverty, one of the solutions is to ensure that vulnerable households maximise their income by claiming all the benefits to which they are entitled. The Borough Council supported by its partners helps to carry out benefit entitlement checks to maximise household income.

(ii) Providing financial assistance

The Borough Council either provides or promotes a range of financial support to households to improve domestic energy efficiency. This includes the Council's Decent Homes and Decent Homes Plus grants which help improve houses to meeting housing standards, including thermal comfort. The Borough Council continues to work with the Government energy efficiency scheme, Warm Front, to ensure that funding is directed towards households where energy efficiency improvements are needed to ensure affordable warmth for Borough residents.

The Borough Council co-leads the Suffolk Greener Home Do-It-Yourself Scheme, a project working with local communities and their residents to provide free loft insulation and other energy saving measures up to a certain value. The project is in the pilot phase; trials have come to an end in the St Edmundsbury Borough and

Suffolk Coastal District with a view to a County-wide launch of the scheme in Spring 2010.

With other organisations in the Western Suffolk Local Strategic Partnership, the Council runs a Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) funded scheme to provide heavily discounted loft insulation to residents who are over 60 years of age. This scheme is an extension of a nationally run scheme of free loft insulation to the over 70s.

(iii) Providing advice and guidance

The Borough Council's Environmental Health Service is often the resident's first point of contact when considering domestic energy efficiency improvements. The Service has officers who have been trained to give energy efficiency advice and refer the residents to the most suitable schemes.

The Borough Council also is part of Suffolk Energy Action Link, the local authority consortium in Suffolk which provides advice to residents across the County on energy efficiency and renewable energy.

The Borough Council maintains working relationships with energy supply companies and local commercial installers of insulation to promote discounted loft and cavity wall insulation to residents through the Government Carbon Emissions Reduction Target, (CERT). This includes endorsing schemes checked by the Council to ensure that they provide the best value for money to Borough residents.

The Council also works closely with the Energy Saving Trust who provides advice on energy, amongst other matters. In particular, the Council participates in events, mail outs and campaigns aimed at communicating the benefits of domestic energy efficiency and carbon reduction.

6. The Council's Energy Efficiency budget

6.1 The Council's Domestic Energy Efficiency budget is £6,000 a year. This is used to carry out promotional work and assist in smaller awareness programmes.

7. Future activity

7.1 The Council's Affordable Warmth Action Plan for the proceeding two years is set out at Appendix A. This is a flexible plan and officers are always looking for opportunities to develop effective projects with partners.

Appendix A

AFFORDABLE WARMTH ACTION PLAN 2009 – 2011

Action/Objective	Critical success factor	Target date	Resource/ Budget
1. Establish an effective communication and monitoring/reporting plan	Design the communication plan particularly targeting the most vulnerable sectors. Prioritise areas of greatest need and target initiatives at households/areas most at risk of fuel poverty: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • poorly insulated homes, • low incomes • hard to heat homes 	Ongoing	Existing resource
	Continue to produce annual reporting detailing all outputs and outcomes to support project monitoring and promotions	Annually	Existing resource
	Empty Homes Strategy- include energy efficiency pack with information	Ongoing	Existing resource
2. Raise awareness of fuel poverty	Support community based staff in a position to assist awareness-raising by providing training and information on fuel poverty. It is important to provide feedback to staff so that the importance of their work is recognised.	Ongoing	Existing resource
	Organise a training session for all home visitors working at West Suffolk College	Ongoing	Existing resource
	Enhance existing mechanisms promoting fuel poverty/affordable warmth issues to St Edmundsbury BC residents. For example continue to support Home Shield, the county wide referral project.	Ongoing	Existing resource
	Host/participate in promotional events on energy efficiency and fuel poverty/affordable warmth	When opportunities are identified	Existing resource
	Work with partners to promote schemes that will assist in achieving the targets identified in this strategy	Ongoing	Existing resource

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Warm Front - improving the heating and energy efficiency of the home and raising income levels - CERT schemes - improving the energy efficiency (SAP rating) of the housing stock 	Ongoing	Existing resource
3. Provide advice service to residents	<p>Provide information to residents through a range of media on all relevant schemes and service providers through a range of media, e.g. council website, a newsletter and third party newsletters and magazines</p> <p>Promote handy tips guide on energy and related issues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - energy saving - money management - accessing grants - energy efficiency measures <p>Work with landlords to promote affordable warmth, relating to the property and the tenants</p> <p>Work with West Suffolk College to target landlords offering student accommodation</p> <p>Provide advice to residents on maximising households income by referring to other agencies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give advice on grants • Energy efficiency measures • Debt relief benefits • Develop a programme of energy efficiency surgeries 	<p>Ongoing</p> <p>Ongoing</p> <p>Annually at the landlords forum</p> <p>January 2010</p> <p>Commencing April 2009</p>	<p>Existing resource</p> <p>Existing resource</p> <p>Existing resource</p> <p>Existing resource</p> <p>Existing resource</p>
4. Ensure residents have access to available services	<p>Provide details to allow householders to access independent information on tariffs and contracts from energy companies</p> <p>Promote the advantages of using basic bank accounts</p> <p>Provide information on relevant consumer watchdogs</p>	<p>Commencing April 2009</p> <p>Commencing April 2009</p>	<p>Existing resource</p> <p>Existing resource</p>

<p>5. Identify and target fuel poor households</p>	<p>Identify households at risk or in fuel poverty using existing data: -Non-gas network map -SEBC House condition survey -Benefit register</p> <p>Bid for project funding through the existing WSLSP fuel poverty group to develop closer links with the NHS to assist in identifying fuel poor households. As part of the project, develop a referral mechanism between the NHS, households and affordable warmth scheme providers</p> <p>Go Warm scheme - targeted campaign working on a street by street level. Identify homes in fuel poverty and offer options to improve the thermal efficiency of the property and increase household income through a benefits health check. Based on the 'Warmer Zones' approach</p>	<p>Commencing April 2009</p> <p>July 2009</p> <p>January 2010</p>	<p>Existing resource and support of the NEA</p> <p>Potential for project funding through grant applications - Scottish Power - WSLSP</p> <p>£20,000</p>
<p>6. Improve the levels of affordable warmth in all house types</p>	<p>Target the most vulnerable households and ensure maximum is spent from annual grant provision</p> <p>Seek funding assistance from external sources to support energy efficiency improvements</p> <p>Investigate new and emerging technological solutions for 'hard to heat' homes- for example air source heat pumps and solar panels</p>	<p>Ongoing</p> <p>Ongoing</p> <p>Ongoing</p>	<p>Existing resource</p> <p>Existing resource</p> <p>Existing resource</p>
<p>7. Develop initiatives to encourage self reliance to improve domestic energy efficiency</p>	<p>Participate in the pilot of the Suffolk Green Homes DIY scheme</p> <p>Identify potential pilot communities. Work with partners to design and test the scheme prior to roll-out across Suffolk</p>	<p>January 2009-April 2011</p> <p>April-June 2009</p> <p>July 2009 -March 2010</p>	<p>Existing resources supported by external funding (part secured)</p>