

Annex 4B

The vulnerable in winter

Introduction

4B.1 During winter, the adverse effects of fuel poverty can become exacerbated, especially for older people, and others in the vulnerable category. Homes become cold and damp, creating mould growth which in turn worsens or leads to respiratory and cardiovascular diseases. The vulnerable are also more likely to have energy inefficient homes, which means that they spend a higher percentage of their income on fuel costs. A combination of these factors can lead to depression and social exclusion. Estimates for 2003 suggest there were 1.0 million vulnerable households in England in fuel poverty. Some 600,000 of those households were estimated to contain someone over 60; this is approximately half of the people in fuel poverty. A similar number of people have a long-term illness or a disability.

Impacts of Fuel Poverty on the Vulnerable

4B.2 The fuel poor are most likely to live in poorly insulated homes with low energy efficiency. A need to economise may cause vulnerable people to put up with the cold conditions because of a fear that they will not be able to afford the increased fuel costs associated with heating their homes during a dip in temperature. The elderly couple, Mr. and Mrs. Bates, who died in their home a few weeks after their gas was disconnected due to the non-payment of their gas bill, is a tragic case of this economising.

4B.3 Excess winter mortality in the UK are higher than other developed countries with similar climates. In the winter of 2003 to 2004, there were around 23,500 excess winter mortality in England and Wales, a 4 per cent decrease when compared to the same period of 2002 to 2003. Of those people who died, over 90 percent were over the age of 65¹, which highlights the need to focus fuel poverty assistance towards older people. If housing conditions are not treated, a cycle is created where poor health could continually worsen.

4B.4 Older people suffer longer recovery time from common illnesses and periods of prolonged immobility can result in it being more difficult for older people to keep warm. The conditions made worst by cold include asthma, other respiratory diseases, cardiovascular disease and depression. People living in

¹ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/Product.asp?vlnk=10805&More=n>

cold, damp homes suffer more frequently from colds and influenza, with older people and children particularly at risk. A greater insight into the health benefits from Warm Front will become available when results from the wide-ranging Health Impact Evaluation of the Warm Front scheme are published later this year.

4B.5 Under occupancy can also be a factor in not being able to afford heating costs. The main reasons for under occupancy are where the children have left home or where a partner has left or died. The threat of social exclusion often means that relocation to more suitable accommodation, where fuel and other housing costs would be cheaper, is difficult. People also tend to be tied to their communities, friends and memories which adds to the difficulty in relocating.

Helping the Vulnerable

4B.6 The Government works with a number of voluntary and consumer bodies, as well as energy companies in giving assistance to the fuel poor. It does this through programmes to improve the energy efficiency of homes, through promoting the support given by other bodies and by putting in place enablers to help organisations focus on energy efficiency and income improvement. The main programmes for fuel poverty eradication are discussed in chapter 4 on [making energy affordable to all](#).

4B.7 Warm Front provides packages of insulation and heating measures depending upon the needs of the householder and the construction of the property. The scheme offers:

1. Grants of up to £1,500, offering packages of insulation such as loft and/or cavity wall insulation, draught proofing, gas wall heaters, dual element foam insulated immersion tank, heating repairs and replacements. The grant is available to:

- Households, with children under the age of 16, in receipt of an income-related benefit;
- Pregnant women, who receive an income-related benefit and have a MAT B1 certificate provided by their doctor;
- Households who receive a disability benefit.

2. Grants of up to £2,500 are available to households who are over 60 and receive an income-related benefit. The grant provides insulation measures and, for those who do not have an existing heating system, a central heating system for the main living areas of the household.

4B.8 This Government scheme, which is administered by Ofgem, sets each supplier a target to save energy based on the number of domestic customers

they supply. The scheme has an environmental aim, providing carbon savings under the Climate Change programme, as well as a social focus, with half of the energy savings to be targeted at the 'priority group' of households that receive income related benefits or tax credits. Customers should speak to their energy company to ascertain what services are available to them.

4B.9 The Priority Services Register is an ongoing register of customers who are disabled, chronically sick or elderly, and is maintained by each energy supplier. The Register entitles individuals to receive certain benefits such as free safety checks of gas appliances, advanced notice of any planned interruptions in the electricity supply and to be first in the queue to have electricity and gas reconnected following, for example, a storm. The latter will be particularly important if medical equipment is used in home.

4B.10 The Keep Warm Keep Well campaign is run by the Department of Health and provides information and advice about staying well in winter by keeping warm. The information and advice is offered through promotional material such as posters and information booklets, which are especially important for older people.

4B.11 The Health, Housing and Fuel Poverty Forum brings together experts in the fields of health, housing and fuel poverty. Its aims are to work together with experts in the fuel poverty, health and housing fields to exchange information and share experience, to make a step-change in professional and public opinion and, ultimately, influence behaviour on the general public and policy makers.

4B.12 The proposed national fuel poverty helpline will also be used to support customers in managing their energy bills and keeping their homes warm. The Helpline, due to be launched in October 2005, will encourage vulnerable households to speak to their energy suppliers, either directly or indirectly so that they can be assisted.

The Benefits to an individual of fuel poverty programmes

4B.13 The benefits of services available to the vulnerable are highlighted by the two case studies on the impact of fuel poverty schemes given below.

4B.14 Mrs Jethwa and her two young children, from Park Village, Wolverhampton, were struggling to cope without heat and hot water, before a Warm Front leaflet came through their door. Mrs Jethwa, who is in receipt of Working Tax Credit, amongst other qualifying benefits, called the Warm Front

Freephone number and filled out an application over the phone. Within two months, a local approved Warm Front installer replaced their boiler. Thanks to Warm Front, they now have a warmer, healthier home. Mrs Jethwa is extremely happy with the results: “the installers who came to do the work were so efficient and I was very impressed with them. They did not leave any mess at all and did not cause any unnecessary disruption.”

4B.15 Mr Frederick Perry, age 78 and his wife, Kathleen, 82, an elderly couple from Eastbourne had their home transformed when a new central heating system was installed under the Warm Front Plus scheme. Before they applied for the Warm Front grant in March 2004, Mr and Mrs Perry often felt the cold, as they struggled to keep their large terraced house warm using two small gas wall heaters. Mrs Perry, who suffers from arthritis, also found that living in a cold, damp home was affecting her health. But since May last year, Mr and Mrs Perry also benefited from a warmer, healthier winter and cheaper fuel bills thanks to a brand new gas central heating system, which was fitted by a local installer. Mrs Perry said “our home is now comfortable and so much warmer now that we’ve had the heating installed. My health has improved and we’ve noticed that we don’t have to worry quite so much about our heating bill as we used to.”