

Dundee Fuel Poverty Focus Group and fact-finding visit to Dundee

Location: Lochee Community Hub

Introduction

1. The Committee agreed that it wished its scrutiny of the Fuel Poverty (Target, Definition and Strategy) (Scotland) Bill to be informed by those who had or were facing direct experience of fuel poverty to ensure that it heard first-hand experience of the issues considered.
2. Committee Members James Dornan (Convener), Graham Simpson and Andy Wightman therefore held a focus group with members of the public at Lochee Community Hub who were facing or had experienced fuel poverty. A summary of the main issues raised during the focus group is attached below.
3. [Lochee Community Hub](#) is a well-used Community Centre which provided a number of vital services to local people in the Community, including advice and assistance with things like paying bills, accessing services and benefits advice. The centre also acted as a social space for people to get together and hosted activities such as exercise classes and games clubs.
4. Following the focus group, Committee Members then had an informal discussion with [Dundee Energy Efficiency Advice Project](#) (DEEAP) at Lochee Community Hub. Committee members were informed that DEEAP was an innovative service established by Dundee City Council advising householders on fuel tariffs, how to reduce bills, energy efficiency measures, advocacy work resolving individuals debts with energy suppliers, and other advice and referral work. Members heard about how the services provided by DEEAP help people in Dundee out of fuel poverty and how they work with other service providers, such as hospitals, housing departments, Registered Social Landlords and social services to provide a holistic approach to tackling poverty.
5. Committee Members then met with a member of the public at their home to experience first-hand how they had benefitted from energy advices and assistance from DEEAP and the impact this had had on their life.
6. The Committee wishes to thank all those who took time out to meet with them and also to thank the staff and volunteers at Lochee Community Hub for hosting its visit.



Committee members Andy Wightman MSP, James Dornan MSP and Graham Simpson MSP at the discussion at Lochee Community Hub.

Focus Group – Summary of Issues

Introduction

1. There were around 16 people in attendance, and of those, most were or had been in social housing and some were or had been in the private rented sector – many had low incomes or were on benefits. It was noted that the cost of rent and fuel was going up at a higher rate than benefits and pay and more people were using food banks and that poverty was a problem in Dundee.

The impact of Universal Credit

2. Committee Members heard that Dundee was a pilot roll-out area for Universal Credit. Many said that, as a result, they had found themselves in financial difficulties and amassed debts due to waits of up to 7 weeks to receive funds. It was highlighted that any crisis loans taken out during the period waiting for funds made it difficult to get back to an equilibrium financially. One person in attendance said that they had seen their disposable income due to the switch from Employment and Support Allowance to Universal Credit reduce from £6/700 a month to £100 a month. This, said some, contributed to difficulties in paying fuel bills.
3. Some highlighted the benefits of grant measures to assist people in paying their fuel prices, such as the winter fuel allowance which is an allowance paid to older people in the winter months to pay fuel process. Some stated, however, that these were often difficult to apply for and one said that people “are made to jump through hoops” to receive them.

4. There was also a lack of clarity around whether people were still entitled to winter fuel allowance when they moved from Employment and Support Allowance to Universal Credit. Some felt that in general sometimes those that worked for the Department for Working Pensions needed more training in relation to the roll-out of Universal Credit as there was often confusion over what further benefits and allowances people were entitled to under the new scheme.

Key and Card meters

5. Many the Committee Members spoke with had some sort of pre-pay electric or gas meters operated by a key or card which have to be credited upfront and the key or card entered into the meter before power can be used. Members heard about the difficulties in keeping these in credit, particularly for those on low incomes. There was a perception that these types of meters were on a higher tariff and therefore they were doubly disadvantaged when it came to paying for their fuel.
6. Committee Members were informed that where someone has credit in their gas meter, but no credit in their electric meter, they still could not use their gas as the gas meter needs electricity to use it. These types of meters have emergency credit which kicks in once the meter goes into negative use. There was a perception that the negative credit went down quicker and therefore made it difficult to get out of negative credit.



Focus group attendees at Lochee Community Hub.

Social Housing

7. In the social housing sector, Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) are responsible for installing energy efficiency measures. Committee Members heard that there were sometimes delays putting in measures like insulation and one individual had

to wait several weeks for insulation to be installed which required many visits from the RSL to identify a suitable solution.

8. One person in attendance had amassed a large amount of debts to her power company and avoided using her heating. She lived in one room and only used electricity for lighting the room and watching the television. She was unable to change her tariff due to the type of heaters and meter she had. She was also recovering from illness. She highlighted that there was a particular problem with the houses provided by her RSL, given that it was known to take on homes built prior to 1987 which were difficult to renovate to make them more energy efficient. It used particular heaters and meters which meant that she was unable to change her supplier to get a better deal. She highlighted that the particular development she was in was used for vulnerable people with illnesses.
9. It was recognised that social housing was usually built to a certain standard, but some said that newly built social housing was not always up to the appropriate standard of energy efficiency.
10. Committee Members heard of one individual in social housing who had benefitted from moving from an old energy inefficient home to a modern well-insulated home which was easy to heat. This meant that she did not have to have the heating on all the time as it kept in the heat. She had saved money on her bills for this reason and with the addition of solar panels, she got free electricity when the sun was on the panels.
11. Another with a similar experience also spoke about the benefits of moving to an energy efficient home and switching to a UK not-for-profit energy supplier. Her electricity bills had reduced from £120 a week in her previous home, to £50 a week gas and electric.
12. One gentleman had benefitted from district heating and his gas was paid as a service charge to Dundee City Council. He had his electric through another supplier, however one downside was that as he was an electricity only customer, he was not able to get a smart meter and it was also a barrier to getting a better deal.
13. In relation to district heating, some said that they had been moved on to such schemes without their permission. It was noted that with district heating each home still had its own meter and people would be charged whether they used it or not. Some felt it should be a pay what you use services.

Private rented sector

14. Of those who had been in the private rented sector, Committee members heard that one difficulty often faced was a reluctance from private landlords to make energy efficiency improvements to the fabric of older homes, such as double glazing, replacing drafty doors or upgrading boilers. Some felt that minimum standards in the private sector should be imposed on private landlords to ensure that homes are made energy efficiency.

General issues

15. We heard that it was very much the individual's responsibility to navigate the different fuel companies in order to get better deal on their fuel prices. It was highlighted that this could be difficult for people who were vulnerable or who had additional support needs. The Hub often had to assist people in locating a better deal.
16. The impact of being fuel poor on other areas of people's lives were highlighted, for example, those unable to pay for fuel might have health issues, such as diabetes, and be unable to cool their insulin if they are unable to keep their fridge on.
17. The Committee heard that storage heaters could be costly and some had been unable to upgrade to quantum or duplex heaters. One individual on electricity only was accruing debt, but had been told by their supplier that because they had storage heating, they were not entitled to a smart meter and they were unable to switch providers.
18. People at the session were reminded by Committee Members that should they be facing difficulties in any of the issues raised above, they could seek help from their elected representatives.



Committee members Andy Wightman MSP, James Dornan MSP and Graham Simpson MSP listening to the discussion at Lochee Community Hub.