

# Fuel Poverty Focus Group Stornoway and fact-finding visits on Lewis and Harris, Western Isles

Thursday 6 December – Friday 7 December 2018

## *Introduction*

1. The Local Government and Communities Committee agreed that its scrutiny of the Fuel Poverty (Target, Definition and Strategy) (Scotland) Bill should be informed by those who had, or were facing, experience of fuel poverty to ensure that it heard first-hand experience of the issues considered.
2. Many stated in their evidence to the Committee that there are high levels of fuel poverty within island communities. Committee Members James Dornan (Convener), Kenneth Gibson, Graham Simpson and Andy Wightman therefore travelled to Stornoway to have a discussion with people with experience of fuel poverty and also visited some homes which had benefited from energy advice and assistance from the organisation [Tighean Innse Gall](#) (TIG) on Lewis and Harris, Western Isles. A summary of the key themes from the discussions are set out below, alongside notes on the houses visited.
3. TIG operates principally across the housing sector to deliver on its mission statement to “support people to rent, buy and live in comfortable, affordable homes; promote independent living and assist business and communities to be more sustainable.” As part of this work, it delivers the Scottish Government Home Energy Efficiency Programme Scotland- Area Based Scheme (HEEPS-ABS scheme). It also provides an energy advisory service on the best ways to save energy and money in the home.
4. The Committee thanks the staff at TIG for hosting the trip but also all those who took time to speak to Members during the evening discussion and on the Committee’s travels.



Convener James Dornan introducing the discussion at Bayhead Bridge Centre, Stornoway.

## Discussion Group – Summary of Issues

Thursday 6 December 2018, 6-8 pm

Bayhead Bridge Centre, Stornoway

### *Introduction*

There were 10 members of public in attendance, and of those, most were owner-occupiers. Three members of staff from TIG also took part in the discussion. They lived in a variety of types of houses around the island, but most were in individual detached properties and were owner-occupiers. There was one social housing tenant at the event. All had received some sort of energy advice or assistance from TIG. Those in attendance were split into two groups, with two members and one note-taker at each.

### **Group 1**

Members of the Local Government Committee

- Kenneth Gibson MSP
- Graham Simpson MSP
  
- 4 members of the public who had received support from Tighean Innse Gall (TIG)
- 1 staff member from TIG



Committee Members Graham Simpson (left) and Kenneth Gibson (right) during a discussion at Bayhead Bridge Centre, Stornoway.

### *Person 1*

1. The first person Committee members spoke with lived on an old post-war cottage on the island with single breeze block and secondary glazing. It was a traditional white long house where the bathroom had been added on at a later stage. She said that you could feel the wind through the kitchen door. The house had a wood burning stove in the kitchen and cylinder gas stove in the living room. The rest of the heaters in the house are storage heaters.
2. She was not on the gas grid and confirmed that only houses in Stornoway are on the grid. It is a section 18 subsidised grid<sup>12</sup>. Outwith Stornoway, there was no other gas grid on the island.
3. She had left the island for a while to work on the mainland and had rented her house out for that period. She returned in 2012 and the house was not in a good condition. Part of this she felt was down to the tenants not heating the place properly due to the costs. It had caused issues with the white goods and also damp walls and cooms.
4. She got in touch with TIG who arranged for the internal of the external walls to be insulated which took about 7 weeks to complete. This made a large difference to the temperature in the home, particularly in the kitchen. She was shocked at the difference after receiving the insulation by TIG.
5. The previous tenant had switched to a fairly high electricity tariff, which it took her a year to switch back from. It offers two rates with two meters. This had reduced her bills from £150 a month to £100. She also highlighted the issue with finding jobs on the island. She was a qualified teacher, but was working three part-time jobs and relying on her credit card for income. She hoped that she would be able to repay any debts she had further down the line.

### *Person 2*

6. The second person Committee members spoke with had moved to the island with her husband 25 years ago. She lived in a bungalow in the centre of Stornoway and had brought her children up on the island. She suffered from ill health (Fibromyalgia), the symptoms of which were exacerbated by cold weather. Her husband had left her with the children and she was on Employment and Support Allowance. She struggled with the price of food, but also has to be careful about her diet as certain foods affect her symptoms. It is more difficult and expensive to get certain types of food on the island as much of it is ferried in from mainland suppliers.

---

<sup>1</sup> Special Condition 18 relates to the conveyance of gas to independent systems. There are four independent LNG networks in Scotland (Wick, Campbeltown, Thurso and Oban) and four independent LPG networks across Great Britain (Stornoway, Llanwrtyd Wells, Llanfyllin and Colden). <https://www.ofgem.gov.uk/ofgem-publications/50140/7940-independentnetworksopenletterpdf>

<sup>2</sup> The HS1 (Stornoway) postcodes have a propane network that comes under a special derogation, a special licence condition section 18. The government subsidises that network to be the same as the mains natural gas. <https://www.tighean.co.uk/tig-switch-switching-site-western-isles/>

7. Her house is around 60-70 years old with breeze block cavity walls. She had had cavity wall insulation, but she felt that this had made little difference in terms of the cold. She also had her storage heaters replaced, but she felt that this had made no difference and her bills were at £100 a month with [Total Heating with Total Control](#)<sup>3</sup>.
8. She feels like the cavity wall insulation has not been done properly and two of her storage heaters do not work. There is no heater in the kitchen and she needs to sit in front of the fire in the morning to get warm and sometimes uses her hairdryer. The cavity wall insulation was done by a different supplier.
9. She feels like she cannot move house as her house is not worth a lot of money if she was to sell. She, unlike the first person, was terrified of getting in debt, so she would rather not use her heating than use a credit card. Because of the lack of heat in the house, she gets black mould on the walls which does not help her health. She felt that she would benefit from some “hand-holding” to call the power companies and this is part of the service that TIG provides. She also thought that she might benefit from an air-source heat-pump.
10. TIG confirmed that often problems happen when other suppliers come in and offer to do work for people at reduced rates. Many of these people are receiving ECO funding<sup>4</sup>, however there may not be quality control checks done to verify the quality of works. TIG can provide a list of recommended suppliers and where it has carried out works, it will do checks to ensure that the work has been done to a certain standard and ensuring value for money.

#### *Person 3*

11. The third person in the group lived in a 100 year old croft house with thick stone walls and small windows. The last tenant had replaced the roof. There were holes in the wall where wiring had been put in. After he had cavity wall insulation and new storage heaters fitted, it was like a new home. It had also made a significant difference to his fuel bills.
12. He is also on Total Heating with Total Control and was told that he cannot switch rates. He was unable to navigate the switching websites and required the face to face support of TIG to eventually switch supplier. He was going to contact TIG again for some further energy assistance.

#### *Person 4*

13. The final person we met had returned to the island in 2010 after living in Glasgow for many years, which he had to leave when he retired. He was left the house as part of someone’s estate. It is an old house with a stone front and brick at the side. There is a flat roof extension, no door on the kitchen and an old bitumen roof which

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://sse.co.uk/help/electric-heating/other-two-meter-tariffs>

<sup>4</sup> The Energy Company Obligation (ECO) is a government energy efficiency scheme in Great Britain to help reduce carbon emissions and tackle fuel poverty. <https://www.ofgem.gov.uk/environmental-programmes/eco>

had not been fitted properly and rain was coming through the wall. The flat roof extension is very cold.

14. He had initially approached TIG to get cavity wall insulation, but the first time he did so, they had run out funding. His boiler had not been working for some time, so he currently only has electricity and is heating one room and the hallway due to the costs involved. He wants to get his gas sorted, but the gas is out of date. It was intimated that should someone opt to get work done to improve the insulation in their home, they would then not be able to get further funding to do boiler work. It was believed to be one or the other. Boiler repairs would be referred on to Warmworks rather than TIG.
15. He felt that he would have benefitted from project management in relation to all the issues around the home which needed repair.

#### *Further information from TIG*

16. TIG confirmed that to assess someone is entitled to receive additional benefits, TIG would establish whether someone is in fuel poverty at the energy advice stage. They also rely on referrals from other agencies, such as home safety and local authorities. They are the selected agency to deliver the HEEPS ABS<sup>5</sup> measures. TIG also provided an online switch service (<https://switch.tighean.co.uk/>). It also spoke of the OurPower not for profit power company which was provided by Hebridean Energy they highlighted that a switch-over to this service could bring bills down by £20 a month.

## **Group 2**

### Members of the LGCC

- James Dornan MSP Convener
- Andy Wightman MSP
  
- 7 local people participated in the discussion.
- 4 elderly people, retired and living in their own home; 1 elderly person living in temporary accommodation; 1 working and living in social housing.
- 2 staff from [Tighean Innse Gall](#), Fuel Poverty Worker and Project Worker working on Gluasad Comhla (Moving Forward) a partnership project working with Langabhat Medical Practice who make referrals to TIG.
- The type of heating people use: 1 oil, 4 electric, 1 air source heating.

---

<sup>5</sup> Home Energy Efficiency Programmes for Scotland (HEEPS) is the Scottish Government initiative to tackle fuel poverty and increase energy efficiency in homes. [https://www.eas.org.uk/en/home-energy-efficiency-programmes-for-scotland-heeps\\_50558/](https://www.eas.org.uk/en/home-energy-efficiency-programmes-for-scotland-heeps_50558/)



Committee Members James Dornan (Convener) (left) and Andy Wightman (right) during a discussion at Bayhead Bridge Centre, Stornoway.

This forms a summary of the discussion that took place.

### **What is your general experience of fuel poverty?**

High cost of fuel, drafty housing with no insulation. Four participants were living in traditional croft houses. Typically, one storey with a room in the roof. One had exterior cladding fitted previously in the 1980s. This did not address the issues. These were older properties often with flat roof extensions which had been added to several times. One participant lived in social housing.

One person had loft insulation fitted by a mainland company who they said had not made a good job of it.

Another had had extremely high heating bills. They had tried to discuss this with their power company and could not get anywhere. They could not afford to put heating on. It went on for months and they built up a debt of over £4,000. This was an extremely distressing situation for them. Was eventually resolved and due to a faulty meter. TIG said this was not unusual & their personal contact with utility helped sort it out.

1920s home, inherited from their grandfather who built it. The house was not wind and water tight.

We heard from a person who had been widowed 5 years ago. They had used a stove and peat fires which were taken away because they could not manage them. They were paying £120 per quarter. For the past 4 years they have been living in temporary accommodation waiting for their house to be adapted. They reported that they are terrified of what the energy costs will be.

The fuel poverty worker was aware of some people paying £90 per week on energy.

We heard from an individual who uses oil. He reported that the cost of oil was very expensive. 3 refills per year. 900 litres each time. He pays £47 pm in electricity on top of oil costs.

We heard from another individual living in social housing where new storage heaters have been installed and stoves/open fires taken out. The open fireplaces have not been closed off. She reported that her house is extremely hard to heat. After pushing the council, they came back to seal off the fire places but now there is a leak and she can't get the situation resolved. She is paying £200pm and is constantly cold. She was told by HEB energy that it would cost £20 - £30per week. She uses a key (prepayment scheme) in order to budget and is scared to move to direct debit in case she gets into debt. She said that she was working and not entitled to benefits or help from any schemes.

The Fuel Poverty Worker referred to retrofitting, taking solid fuel out of older houses and installing air source heating into houses that have not been insulated properly. Workers felt it was effective in new builds but not in older properties. TIG explained that storage heaters were often installed in homes with open fire places but the fireplace was not blocked off, and that surveyors estimate in a living room of average size in 7 mins will lose its heat up the open fireplace. This happened under HEEPS.

Another person reported that they were out of work and on sickness benefits. They live in a croft house with a flat roof extension and can't get insulation because it leaks.

Participants reported that they themselves and other islanders are worried about power cuts which happen regularly. Especially if they moved from traditional stove and open fires to electricity.

### **What is your past experience of seeking support? What worked for you and where did you experience issues?**

4/5 participants had received support from TIG and were extremely grateful to them and found their support invaluable. Some had received support over many years. Energy advice, measures installed, such as interior cladding, repairs done. They trusted TIG and felt supported by them.

One person reported that TIG helped them identify a problem with their meter which the energy company denied. They said 'I don't know where I would be without them. It took months to sort out and without TIG this would not have happened.'

We heard from another person who had interior wall cladding installed and new radiators. This had reduced their heating bills from £180 per month to £112.

Another approached the council and was referred to Care & Repair <sup>6</sup>. They have received support from TIG for years for many different issues. Including energy advice and measures installed.

One individual reported that because they have a small pension they are not entitled to benefits which means they are not entitled to the winter fuel payments.

Some people reported that for themselves and others, advice to switch energy suppliers did not always work well. A couple of people had had problems after switching.

Support had been received from Citizens Advice Scotland, TIG, Care & Repair.

People didn't feel there was anywhere else to go. They said that the Council used to offer grants for house improvements but not anymore.

**Do you have any suggestions for possible solutions? What support do you expect would help people in your situation?**

The following suggestions were made:

People on pension credits should get an automatic discount.

New technologies - people thought new technologies were a good idea but couldn't afford to buy them e.g. solar panels and felt that they would not see the benefit within their lifetime.

Smart meters – people said that the mobile phone signal on the islands are not good enough for smart meters. Islanders had been told that everyone would have them by 2020. Now they are saying they will be offered it by 2020. EE is being rolled out on the islands for emergency services but not for smart meters.

Automatically install solar panels when electric heating is installed.

Cap the cost of energy.

Take account of the wind chill on the island in triggering eligibility for winter fuel payments (now devolved to Scottish Parliament).

Oil costs 56p per litre on the island and 49p on the mainland. Some felt that they should receive support or a subsidy.

Different solutions are needed for croft houses.

Take a more holistic approach. Fitting some measures and not others, does not work.

---

<sup>6</sup> The Western Isles Care & Repair service is undertaken by Tighean Innse Gall, working under a Service Level Agreement with the NHS Intergrated Joint Board (IJB)>

Retrofit houses, install biomass boilers. Those who had had this work done stated that before they were spending £4,000 per year on energy, now they spend under £1,000. Using pellets is still cost effective, even though they need to be brought over from the mainland.

Everyone agreed that there should be a different measure of fuel poverty for rural areas.

Face to face support from a trusted organisation, time to build a relationship in order to get advice, change behaviours and access support. Partnerships between different services. Trust is important and the length of the relationship so people come back for help when they need it and trust the trust the organisation when they need to make a referral to a different organisation so that people will accept help from the new organisation and not just disappear.

Trusted local workmen.

**Friday 7 December 2018**  
**Fact-finding visits to homes on Lewis and Harris**

Property 1	
Issues	<p>Traditional croft house with minimal insulation within the Rooms within the roof space (1<sup>st</sup> floor) and no insulation to the walls within the original house (stone walls).</p> <p>Exposed location and house subject to driving wind and rain.</p> <p>Large house with only a single occupant in the property.</p>
TYPE property	<p>Traditional stone built property with 2 rooms within the 1<sup>st</sup> floor roof space and 2 rooms at ground floor of the original house. A cavity extension has been added to accommodate a kitchen at a later date.</p> <p>Oil fired central heating throughout</p>
Work done	<p>Room in Roof insulation complete to upper floor rooms and Internal Wall Insulation has been installed to the internal surface of the external stone walls of the original house.</p> <p>The works included treating all internal surfaces of external facing elements including stripping, sealing and insulating around windows and in all cupboards and built in wardrobes.</p> <p>Works included all associated electrical and plumbing works, taping and filling and decoration on completion – all to client's satisfaction.</p>
Benefits	<p>The house is significantly warmer, a reduction if energy bills, improved comfort and noise reduction.</p> <p>The EPC rating improved from a G (15) to a F (31) The typical savings p/a for taking the above actions (EPC data) estimates a saving of £1,493 p/a. However, in reality we expect this saving to be in the region of £400-600 p/a.</p>
Any other	<p>Client has renewed pride in his house.</p> <p>Aesthetic improvements as affected areas are painted.</p> <p>Provided client opportunity to undertake further works whilst reliable contractors are on site.</p>



Committee Members Graham Simpson (left), Kenneth Gibson (middle) and James Dornan (Convener) (right) at a home on the islands fact-finding visit.

Property 2	
Issues	<p>Traditional croft house with minimal insulation within the Rooms within the roof space (1<sup>st</sup> floor) and no insulation to the walls within the original house (stone walls)</p> <p>Exposed location and house subject to driving wind and rain.</p> <p>Large house with only a single occupant in the property.</p>
TYPE property	<p>Traditional stone built property with 2 rooms within 1<sup>st</sup> floor roof space and 2 rooms and bathroom at ground floor of the original house and stone built extension. A a cavity extension has been added to the rear accommodate a kitchen at a later date</p> <p>The property has Electric Storage heaters</p>
Work done	<p>External Wall Insulation to all solid built elements of the house. Over and above the insulation and the new render finish this included the framing out of roof verge and eaves, the application of new slate flashings, fascia's and the supply and installation of new rainwater goods.</p> <p>Room in Roof insulation was completed to upper floor rooms.</p> <p>The works included treating all internal surfaces of external facing elements including stripping, sealing and insulating around windows and in all cupboards and built in wardrobes.</p>

	<p>Works included all associated electrical and plumbing works, taping and filling and decoration on completion – all to client's satisfaction.</p> <p>Energy advice given to householder. This included comparisons for electricity switching, installing an energy monitor, installing log tags to 6 rooms pre and post insulation showing increased levels of comfort, and changing cylinder stat temperature, as set too high.</p>
Benefits	<p>The house is significantly warmer, a reduction in energy bills, improved comfort and noise reduction</p> <p>The EPC rating improved from a G (15) to a D (55) The typical savings p/a for taking the above actions (EPC data) estimates a saving of £1,225 p/a. However, in reality we expect this saving to be in the region of £300-500 p/a.</p>
Any other	<p>Client has renewed pride in her house.</p> <p>Aesthetic improvement as insulated walls are re-rendered and rough casted New rain water goods and new fascia's</p>



Committee Members Andy Wightman (left), James Dornan (Convener) (middle) and Graham Simpson (right) at a home on the islands fact-finding visit.

Property 3	
Issues	<p>Traditional croft house with minimal insulation within the Rooms within the roof space (1<sup>st</sup> floor) and no insulation to the walls within the original house (poured concrete walls)</p> <p>Exposed location and house subject to driving wind and rain.</p>

	Large house with only a single occupant in the property.
TYPE property	Traditional poured concrete built property with 2 rooms at ground and first floor of the original house. Extension also constructed in poured concrete  The property has electric heating
Work done (Onsite)	Room in Roof insulation complete to upper floor rooms and Internal Wall Insulation has been installed to the internal surface of the external stone walls of the original house.  The works included treating all internal surfaces of external facing elements including stripping, sealing and insulating around windows and in all cupboards and built in wardrobes.  Works included all associated electrical and plumbing works, taping and filling and decoration on completion – all to client's satisfaction.
Benefits	Not complete yet, work ongoing.  The EPC rating improved from a G (7) to a F (34)  A notional saving of £1,580 according to EPC (reduction of circa 40%)
Any other	Not complete yet.



Committee Members at a home on the islands fact-finding visit.