

Helping Arun District residents tackle fuel poverty



Advice for councillors Winter 2009/10



A household is in fuel poverty where the residents have to spend more than 10% of their household income in order to achieve the basic temperatures needed to maintain health and comfort in the home.

Rising energy costs combined with the current financial climate will leave many struggling to pay their bills this winter and the number of Arun residents living in fuel poverty could increase further. Those most at risk of fuel poverty are pensioners, people on low incomes, people in poor housing and those who spend a lot of time at home.

Living in a cold home can cause ill health, make existing illness worse, deepen poverty and debt, affect children's education and increase social isolation. No one deserves to live in such conditions, but there are solutions and as a councillor, you can help those who need assistance.

How to recognise fuel poverty

Signs that indicate a resident is living in fuel poverty include:

- home feels cold or draughty, smells of damp
- no visible form of heating or the only heating is open fire or stand alone heaters
- ventilators are blocked up
- temperature changes between rooms
- signs of condensation/dampness
- little or no food in the fridge
- no evidence of recently prepared hot drinks
- not complaining despite the room feeling cold
- saying bills are too high or they owe money for fuel
- wanting to stay in hospital because it's more comfortable
- using a pre-payment meter to avoid running up debt
- using only part of the house

Did you know?

The National Housing Association has revealed in a recent report that over 5.7 million households are likely to be living in fuel poverty by the end of 2009, that's an increase of 100% over 2005 levels.

How to help tackle fuel poverty

The Council can offer advice, but often other groups need to be involved to make sure residents can access all the help available (contact details for these organisations are over the page).

1. Keeping warm and well

- Eating for warmth is an important message to many people living in fuel poverty, especially older residents. Regular hot meals and drinks can provide much needed warmth and energy.
- Homes are healthier if kept at the right temperature, the living room should be kept at 21°C (72°F) and the bedroom 18°C (65°F).

2. Offering benefits advice

Millions of pounds in benefits goes unclaimed every year. Even if the benefit is a small amount, qualification can lead to entitlement to other schemes and assistance. The Citizens Advice Bureau can help residents access the benefits they are entitled to so they have more disposable income to heat their home. Pensioners can also contact the Pension Service for information.

3. Dealing with high fuel bills

Consumer Direct/Focus (replaces Energywatch)

If a customer has a complaint they should first contact their energy supplier, but if the response is not satisfactory, the Government service Consumer Direct can:

- help the customer take their complaint to the independent redress scheme for energy services;
- refer vulnerable residents, who have been or are at risk of being disconnected by their energy supplier, to the Extra Help Unit at Consumer Focus;
- provide information on tariffs and how to compare and switch to a new supplier.

Home Heat Helpline

The free Home Heat Helpline has been set up by the Energy Retail Association, which represents energy suppliers, for vulnerable customers having difficulties paying or understanding their fuel bills.

Energy Tariffs

All the major energy suppliers and some of the smaller ones now offer social tariffs and cheaper energy deals to customers on low incomes.

Even if not eligible for a social tariff, switching supplier(s) can save a household up to £280 per year, especially if the resident has never changed their supplier or have not changed their supplier for a while. There are a number of comparison services designed to help customers switch to the best tariff through a web-search or a telephone advisor. The Home Heat Helpline and Consumer Direct can offer guidance on using these services.

Priority Services Register (PSR)

The PSR is available to pensioners, the disabled and the chronically sick. Residents register for the PSR direct with their gas and electricity suppliers or through the Home Heat Helpline, and are entitled to a number of free services, such as:

- free annual gas safety checks for qualifying customers;
- password protection for house visits;
- large print, Braille and talking bills or bill nominee scheme;
- quarterly meter reading or moving meters for better access;
- priority power in an emergency for essential medical equipment or providing alternative heating/cooking facilities;
- a guarantee that suppliers cannot disconnect their property in winter.

4. Offering Energy Debt advice

Customers should discuss their circumstances with their energy supplier to find a suitable way to pay debt. Failing that, suppliers are obliged to offer to install a pre-payment meter to avoid disconnection, which is the last resort.

Suppliers will offer vulnerable customers help, such as installing a pre-payment meter or putting them onto the Fuel Direct payment scheme. If help is refused and the customer continues to be at risk, social services will be notified.

Consumer Direct can provide valuable advice and guidance to customers dealing with very high and/or complicated energy bills and debts.

5. Tackling poor energy efficiency

Adequate Heating System

- Central heating with an efficient gas boiler is usually the most cost effective option but knowing how to use the controls is important.
- Electric bar fires, electric radiators or bottle gas fires are very expensive and a trip hazard. It is cheaper to run gas central heating in all rooms than to run a two bar electric fire in just one.
- Storage heating should be operated on Economy 7 or an equivalent energy deal to take advantage of cheaper night rates. Again, it's important to use the controls efficiently.
- Households may be eligible for help to repair/install heating systems through the Warm Front Grants (see contacts section).

Adequate Insulation

- Loft insulation can reduce bills by around £155 a year, and cavity wall insulation by around £120. Part-payment and 100% grants are available through all energy suppliers and Arun residents can access grants through HCL Energy (01273 390420).
- Some homes have solid walls, no loft space and/or no connection to the gas network which makes them harder to heat and insulate. Interior and exterior solid wall insulation can work but is more expensive than cavity wall insulation and no grants are available in Arun. The Energy Saving Trust or National Insulation Association can give advice.
- Only 10% of heat is lost through windows, but up to £110 a year can be saved by fitting double glazing. Secondary glazing can also save money but no grants are currently available in Arun.

Adequate draught-proofing

- Draughts make a house feel colder than it is. Professional draught proofing is cheap and easy and even a heavy curtain across a door can make a difference.

Adequate ventilation

- Heating and insulation will reduce condensation, but ventilation is needed to eradicate damp. After a bath/shower or when cooking, residents should open a window briefly or install an extractor fan and always keep lids on pans when cooking.

6. Useful contacts for grants and assistance

- **Warm Front:** Eligible homeowners and tenants, with the landlord's permission, can get government grants up to £3,500 (or up to £6000 if oil central heating involved) for measures including loft and cavity wall insulation, draught-proofing, boiler repairs and replacement and new central heating systems.

Residents who do not qualify for the main Warm Front grant but who are over 60 may qualify for the Warm Front £300 rebate scheme towards the cost heating repairs/installation.

Residents can contact 0800 3162314 or www.warmfront.co.uk for more information or call 0800 072 9006 to simply find out if they are eligible.

- **Loft and Cavity Wall Insulation Grants:**

HCL Energy manage an insulation scheme for the Council. Arun residents can apply for 100% grants and part-payment grants from £199 by phoning HCL Energy on 01273 390420. Insulation grants are also available directly through all energy suppliers.

Information and guidance on various solid wall insulation solutions can be sought from the National Insulation Association www.nationalinsulationassociation.org.uk or 01525 383313. Alternatively the Energy Saving Trust may be able to help (see right).

- **Energy Savings Trust Advice Centre:** Free and impartial advice on energy issues, including energy efficiency grants. They manage grant schemes for several local councils in East and West Sussex. 0800 512012 or www.energysavingtrust.org.uk.
- **Home Heat Helpline:** A free service specifically for people worried about paying their gas or electric bills. 0800 336699 or www.homeheathelpline.org
- **Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB):** Free, confidential and independent advice to help resolve debt, benefits, housing, legal, discrimination, employment, immigration and consumer problems.
 - o Littlehampton CAB 01903 724010
 - o Bognor Regis CAB 01243 842981
 - o www.adviceguide.org.uk
- **Consumer Direct:** Government service for impartial consumer advice on energy services and making a complaint. 08454 040506 or www.consumerdirect.gov.uk.
- **Pension Service:** Can give residents receiving a pension advice about the benefits they are entitled to. 0845 6060265 or www.the.pensionservice.gov.uk.



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Further information on energy efficiency, fuel poverty and renewable energy technologies is on the energy pages of the Council website www.arun.gov.uk/energy.

This advice has been put together by Jo Brooks, Arun District Council's full-time Energy Efficiency Officer. Jo is based in Environmental Health in the Civic Centre and can help with any energy efficiency enquiries. Call 01903 737690 or email joanna.brooks@arun.gov.uk.

www.arun.gov.uk/energy