



Energy and fuel

Lifting people out of fuel poverty must be given a higher priority. Rural residents must also have fair access to energy efficiency measures provided through government

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Introduction

Fuel poverty is a constant issue for many of those living on low wages or benefits in rural areas. The current delivery of Government-backed energy efficiency measures is failing people who live in difficult-to-treat houses and those that have to rely on heating oil or LPG for their energy. RCCs who run-oil buying groups continue to help those people struggling to pay for energy by providing cheaper fuel.

Community renewable energy generation can play a part in the sustainability of rural communities but ACRE believes more investment in support organisations is required for groups thinking of setting up a scheme, especially in the early stages of the process

Overview

Recent fuel poverty statistics state that under the Low Income High Cost (LIHC) measure, there were 2.6 million fuel poor households in England; an estimated 500,000 of these households are located in rural areas.

The recent sharp rises in the cost of energy will have exacerbated fuel poverty in rural areas. With a high percentage of inefficient solid wall housing and many homes without a connection to the mains gas grid, rural communities face unique fuel poverty challenges.

Evidence from ACRE's survey work indicates that the recent changes to the Government schemes - the Energy Company Obligation and Green Deal - have had a detrimental impact on rural households. It is now more difficult to achieve meaningful improvements to the thermal properties of rural housing, especially to have solid wall insulation installed.

ACRE has worked with other organisations towards highlighting the benefits of switching energy supplier

but our evidence shows that people are still largely confused about what their fuel bills are telling them and how to go about switching supplier.

Currently replacement of oil and LPG boilers is not available through a new Government boiler cashback scheme. This is highly detrimental to people in rural areas who are fuel poor and unable to access these offers.

Renewable energy can play an important role in addressing climate change, reducing energy bills and lifting people out of fuel poverty. ACRE and its Network members have promoted the DECC and Defra Rural Community Energy Fund (RCEF) launched in 2012. Our recent survey indicates the need for better 'free' advice at the very early stages of the process to enable a group to access funding.

ACRE and its members are helping to tackle these challenges by raising awareness of Government programmes to improve energy efficiency and also by working with local authorities and other organisations on a variety of local energy projects.



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Issue: Changing people's behaviour

Changing people's behaviour is key to reducing energy consumption in the home and at work. Informing communities about how they can go about reducing energy can give people the incentive to go further to gain the benefits and reduce their bills.

Solution: Using a trusted local voice to deliver information and guidance

Using a trusted local voice to deliver information and guidance is the best method of engaging people to change their behaviour and reduce energy consumption

The Cornwall Rural Community Charity has been active as part of the Big Energy Saving Network (BESN), supporting individuals to take action to save money by seeing if they can get onto a cheaper energy deal and taking up energy efficiency offers.

Jane Morgan, the BESN champion, provided advice and support to an elderly couple in Pendeen, a village off the gas grid in the far west of Cornwall.

By supporting them throughout the process, Jane ensured that the couple saved money by switching their energy supplier, moving to a cheaper payment method, and switching to a fixed rate tariff. She was able to sit with them and explain the options available through the various comparison websites, and what they all meant. Based on this advice, the couple completed a switch resulting in an annual bill reduction of £243. In St Breward, another rural off-gas network village on Bodmin Moor, Jane

was able to assist a lady who had been recently widowed by calling her supplier and agreeing a reduction of her direct debit by £60 a month, with a further reduction made possible by switching to a fixed-rate tariff.

More broadly, the BESN champion has also provided advice on the availability of energy supplier trust funds which can, for example, provide support for the replacement of white goods. And they have taken to the airwaves, talking to local radio to promote the project, leading to a number of follow-up calls.

The advice and support provided by the BESN has enabled community champions, such as Jane, to help the most vulnerable. Jane was one of over 150 BESN champions who attended training courses run by National Energy Action prior to the start of the programme.

As well as the advice and information received on the day, the champions were also equipped with handouts and newsletters on energy issues to ensure those they are advising have access to as much relevant and up to date information as possible.



Issue: Community renewable energy

Rural communities require on the ground advice on how to develop renewable energy solutions.

Solution: Provide communities with a wide range of expert, trusted advice

In 2011, Nick Comley, Organisation Development Coach at Community First in Herefordshire and Worcestershire, supported Malvern Youth and Community Society with a Community Asset Transfer of the former Malvern Youth House from Worcestershire

County Council. The local authority had intended to close the building and relocate services considering it to be too expensive to run and maintain.

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Solution: Provide communities with a wide range of expert, trusted advice

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Malvern Community Collective and Transition Malvern Hills successfully campaigned for the Community Asset Transfer by lease and with Community First business support through the Co-operative Enterprise Hub set up a Charitable Community Benefit Society to take over the building and provide services.

In 2014 further support was provided by Community First to The Cube to consider options on financing the replacement of a failing gas boiler which included options for bio-mass and solar solutions by Richard Timney, Community Buildings Adviser at Community First. Transition Malvern and Share Energy were engaged to develop proposals for a community energy solution that would help to increase the sustainability and help control the running costs of The Cube.

In May 2014 Share Energy conducted a successful Community Share Issue, as specialist renewable

energy support providers under the Co-operative Enterprise Hub, to raise the necessary investment to install a 25Kw Solar PV array on the roof of The Cube. Malvern Community Energy Co-operative intends to provide sustainable alternatives to fossil fuels across the Malvern area at other sites in the future.

Community Buildings Adviser, Richard Timney at Community First has also supported the installation of a number of Solar PV arrays and other renewable energy technologies at village halls across Herefordshire and Worcestershire working with village hall committees to secure the necessary finance and grants to fund their project.

Organisation Development Coach, Nick Comley is a Co-operative Enterprise Hub accredited business support adviser who can support the development of Community Co-operatives or Community Benefit Societies to secure important local assets through Community Shares.

Issue: Off-grid, oil-reliant households

Rural households reliant on heating oil for their energy needs, are facing increasing costs. Currently, they are not able to access servicing or replacement boilers as part of the Government initiative to make homes more energy efficient.

Solution: ACRE Network provides oil-buying clubs

More than 20 members of the ACRE Network run community oil-buying schemes, purchasing more than seven million litres each year on behalf of customers. Scheme members pay a small annual fee for their orders to be placed by a local co-ordinator who buys in bulk, negotiating the best price per litre.

As well as helping the environment by reducing the amount of traffic and fuel consumption by oil tankers, the schemes get communities working together and encourage volunteering.

Music consultant Jonathan Robinson is the Oil Buying co-ordinator for the village of Widford, near Ware, through the Community Development Action



Hertfordshire scheme. He volunteered for the role after moving into his 400-year-old home 18 months ago with his wife Heather and two children.

“There’s nothing like moving to a rural area and into a house that is oil-fired to focus one’s mind on the cost of household fuel,” said Jonathan (pictured).

“Failing to understand our consumption patterns led to our household completely running dry during our first cold winter. That was the spur that led me to CDA Herts.

“Aside from a very real saving from the first delivery, it’s proved a great way of meeting new people and provides a valuable bit of community ‘glue.’”