

Fuel Poverty in Cornwall - Round Table

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Photo: Mark Richardson, Cornwall Voluntary Sector Forum

In February 2014, thirteen strategic leaders came together in a unique forum to address the issue of fuel poverty in Cornwall. Hosted by charity and social enterprise Community Energy Plus, participants included academics, voluntary sector leaders, local government representatives and public health experts. The discussion was facilitated by Mark Richardson, Chief Executive of the Cornwall Voluntary Sector Forum.

Participants

Gary Almond, Programme Delivery Manager, Glow Cornwall, British Gas

Anthony Ball – Tackling Inequalities Coordinator, Cornwall Council

Stuart Bourne – Deputy Director of Public Health, Cornwall Council

Donna Darby – Partnerships Manager, Age UK Cornwall

Professor Kevin Elliston – Public Health Consultant in Health Improvement, Public Health England

Bethany Redley – South West Project Development Coordinator, National Energy Action

Mark Richardson (Facilitator) – Chief Executive, Cornwall Voluntary Sector Forum

Dr Tim Jones – Chief Executive, Community Energy Plus

Stuart Kenney – Private Sector Housing Manager, Cornwall Council

Nicola McCheyne – Delivery Team Manager, Community Energy Plus

Russ Moody – Health Improvement Manager, Public Health England, Health and Wellbeing (Devon, Cornwall and Somerset Centre)

Sarah Newton MP – Member of Parliament for Truro and Falmouth and Deputy Chair of the Conservative Party

Dr Nick Osborne – Senior Research Fellow, European Centre for Environmental and Human Health, University of Exeter Medical School



Photo: Nicola McCheyne, Community Energy Plus

The Challenge of Fuel Poverty in Cornwall

Cornwall has some specific characteristics which inform the energy needs of householders. “In Cornwall 48% of homes are off the mains gas network, and therefore rely on more expensive forms of heating,” explained Nicola McCheyne. “Additionally 35% of homes have solid walls, making them much more expensive to insulate. A greater proportion of detached properties compared to the national average add to this challenge, as does the higher percentage of Cornish residents who are of pensionable age.”

Stuart Kenney, Private Sector Housing Manager at Cornwall Council, gave details of the private rented sector, where half of the 40,000 rented homes in Cornwall don’t meet the minimum standards set by government. 70% of this shortfall was due to lack of thermal comfort.

Underlying all of this are household incomes significantly lower than the national average.

“A huge amount of effort is needed to raise household incomes in Cornwall,” said Sarah Newton, MP for Truro and Falmouth. “This can’t be ignored in the debate around fuel poverty. We need to look at the bigger picture, including skills, training and the benefit structure.”

It is clear that Cornwall faces a real challenge in delivering solutions to fuel poverty. This has been exacerbated by the faltering ambitions of the Energy Company Obligation (ECO) scheme, resulting in a reduction in the number of solid-walled properties forecast to be insulated. “Sporadic and inconsistent funding is hampering the delivery of long-term solutions,” explained Nicola McCheyne. “We need to create a robust business case for effective intervention in fuel poverty in Cornwall, and for investing in healthy homes.”

Fuel Poverty Round-Table – The Discussion

“Collectively, this group has the ability to shape policy and undertake practical delivery to tackle fuel poverty in Cornwall. We hope that this round-table will act as a catalyst for creating a fairer energy future.” Tim Jones, Chief Executive, Community Energy Plus.

The discussion sought to address the challenges of evidence, policy and funding, and in doing so to remove some of the barriers to change.

Discussion Point: Evidence

What kind of evidence is needed to elevate fuel poverty up the policymaking agenda, and do we have the right kind of data to make an economic case for investment?

As Bethany Redley highlighted in her award presentation, “statistics alone cannot illustrate the true extent of suffering resulting from people being unable to heat their homes adequately.” The group agreed that both the human and economic impacts are complex and multi-faceted, and cross many areas of policymaking. Stuart Bourne, Deputy Director of Public Health, Cornwall Council, said “there needs to be some sense of what the liability is with fuel poverty in order for the message to hold sway with funders. Strategic needs assessments are being carried out locally, but fuel poverty doesn’t always make the agenda.”

This is despite some substantial evidence on the impacts of fuel poverty, as Anthony Ball, Tackling Inequalities Co-ordinator, Cornwall Council, pointed out, including the Marmot Review which showed the wide-ranging effect on public health. In terms of the economic impact, Age UK has done some research which shows that fuel poverty costs the NHS £1.3bn a year. It seems that rather than a lack of evidence, it is the correct form and level of integrated understanding which is lacking. This barrier must be overcome in order to achieve a consensus on tackling fuel poverty.

The complexities of poorly heated homes are felt in many areas. Quantifying evidence across physical and mental health services, school attendance and educational attainment, work absences and unemployment, GP visits and nutrition, is a vast task. “We could make some comparisons with evidence about smoking and inactive lifestyles – these are public health issues with wide-ranging impacts which have successfully made the economic case for intervention,” argued Stuart Bourne.

The Pioneer Project, an integrated approach to health and social care which aims to relieve pressure on the system and prevent people from falling into the gaps between agencies, may enable us to promote joined-up thinking in a local context. Donna Darby from Age UK voiced the thoughts of the group, saying that “everybody should be working together in order to build on the momentum of the Winter Wellbeing Programme.”

Data relating to households unable to access the mains gas network may help strengthen the case for tackling fuel poverty. Mapping these areas will identify pockets of high risk – often hard to treat houses in rural areas. Sarah Newton MP described



Photo: Bethany Redley, National Energy Action

her role in a major national project to create a list of postcodes off the mains gas network. “We understand that the process of identifying people off-grid and in fuel poverty is hampering the application of intervention measures. We are trying to remove this barrier by matching data from multiple sources and ironing out data protection issues.”

Nicola McCheyne asked whether this set of information could be used to give early payments to households reliant on oil and LPG, before prices rise during the winter. Sarah Newton MP confirmed that this was the intention.

This kind of data-capture provides the opportunity to study fuel poverty at ground level. Mark Richardson, Chief Executive of the Cornwall Voluntary Sector Forum, pointed out the potential to track houses which have been continually in fuel poverty over a long period of time. The concept of a 3D map of fuel poverty emerged. Stuart Bourne suggested that this kind of data could galvanise action, as it would allow people to visualise the extent of the problem and engage with the issues.

Nick Osborne, Senior Research Fellow at the European Centre for Environmental and Human Health, was enthusiastic about the role of this and other kinds of ‘big data’. “Wales are doing some amazing things with this sort of information,” he explained. “We would like to take advantage of the technology in the future, but it will take time. We are about to get some of the relevant software down to Cornwall to take a look at the potential, and the level of granularity needed.”

Conclusion

Cross-sector evidence needs to be drawn together at a local level to present a comprehensive picture of the wide-ranging impacts of fuel poverty in Cornwall. The economic case must be strengthened in order to secure funding. Data on off-grid households and the opportunities provided by ‘big data’ must be capitalised upon.

Discussion Point: Policy

What are the policy levers that we have to enable us to address the issues around fuel poverty in Cornwall?

Sarah Newton MP explained that as well as work to map off-grid households, the government is providing funding to energy companies to extend the gas network. Gary Almond from Glow Cornwall outlined a project already taking place in Wadebridge, where free connections are being made to fifty homes. This could have an exponential effect on the grid in the future, as the criteria for connection is to be within 50 metres of a supply. In Truro and Falmouth, where connecting properties is viable due to the semi-urban nature of housing, this policy could introduce cheaper energy to a large number of residents.

As well as an extended gas network, Cornwall is exploring district heating and geothermal heat sources as ways of reducing the county’s energy costs. Schemes like this will be vital in order to fill in the gaps which the gas network will still not reach. Sarah Newton MP explained that Cornwall is “looking at how we can harness deep geothermal heat resources on an economically viable scale.

Donna Darby highlighted the great work of the voluntary sector in running their own campaigns and mini-pilots, looking at creative ways to tackle fuel poverty at grassroots level. Bethany Redley also emphasised the importance of community groups and outreach services, which shouldn’t be overlooked in the era of big data. However the round-table agreed that pilots and pioneer projects need to be aligned in order to maximise the use of resources. The Winter Wellbeing Project was praised for its partnership approach, which avoided replication and reinforced long-term outcomes.



Photo: Sarah Newton MP

Clearly there are issues with the ECO policy which need to be addressed. Bethany outlined a failure in confidence in the policy amongst the public and charitable organisations. Nicola McCheyne emphasised that many people fall through the gaps when it comes to ECO, and Gary Almond added that some of the changes to ECO were making it more difficult for Glow Cornwall to deliver energy efficiency schemes. Mark Richardson suggested that this is an issue that the group should lobby on at a national level.

In terms of housing policy, there are some positive moves to improve thermally deficient homes. Stuart Kenney explained that Domestic Energy Efficiency Regulations will come into force in 2018. These will prevent any properties with a G or F Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) rating from being rented. A landlord registration programme is also underway, in an effort to actively engage landlords in energy efficiency schemes. “There certainly needs to be a minimum standard set in Cornwall. For me, partnership across departments is key to improving the housing stock,” said Stuart Kenney.

Conclusion

There are some positive policies being put into practice, including government funding for identifying households off the mains gas grid and extending the gas network where possible, and improvements in the private rental sector. In Cornwall there is a positive attitude towards innovation and renewable energy solutions, including district heat networks and geothermal heat sources. However ECO must be reformed if a consistent, long-term strategy is to take effect.



Photo: Dr Nick Osborne, European Centre for Environmental and Human Health, University of Exeter Medical School



Photo: Donna Darby, Age UK Cornwall



Photo: Stuart Kenney, Cornwall Council



Photo: Dr Tim Jones, Community Energy Plus



Photo: Prof Kevin Elliston, Public Health England



Photo: Anthony Ball, Cornwall Council



Photo: Stuart Bourne, Cornwall Council

Discussion Point: Funding

How can the funding gaps we have identified be filled, what can be done to address intermittent funding streams?

Discussions around funding highlighted the need for an integrated approach, bringing various strands of public money together in order to align stakeholders. "Fragmented budgets are not helpful when it comes to fuel poverty," said Stuart Bourne. Mark Richardson reinforced this, saying "fuel poverty clearly needs to be viewed as a collective responsibility across departments, and needs to be locked into core funding."

Enquiries were made as to how a successful project like Winter Wellbeing has been unable to secure funding for the winter 2013/14. Sarah Newton MP explained that Winter Wellbeing received interim funds while the government moved from Carbon Emissions Reduction Target (CERT) to ECO. This interim fund has ended, but the Public Health budget has subsequently increased. Anthony Ball clarified that the Public Health budget had been fully allocated when the absence of continued government funding for Winter Wellbeing became evident. However, this winter £10,000 of the Public Health budget was invested in this year's smaller Winter Wellbeing programme. As other projects came to an end, it was hoped that funds would be made available again.

The group agreed that in light of this opportunity of future funding, the message on fuel poverty must be loud and clear, and the case must be made coherently to Cornwall Council and the NHS in Cornwall. "We must make the case based on place, and a strategic analysis of Cornwall's needs, rather than trying to segment the impacts of fuel poverty out to different departments," said Stuart Bourne. "We also need to get past seasonality and put the issue on the agenda for 12 months of the year."

As well as lobbying for a share of the Public Health budget, a strong economic case must be made for EU funding to be channelled into fighting the causes of fuel poverty in Cornwall. "There is a potentially cyclical effect that we could break," said Anthony Ball, "cold homes lead to poor physical and mental health, lower educational attainment and job prospects, and hence to lower incomes and fuel poverty." However Tim Jones pointed out that energy efficiency is often relegated in these strategic plans. "Unfortunately despite their enormous impact on quality of life, things like insulation schemes don't have the same punch as renewables. They are often overlooked."

If these barriers can be overcome, there is the potential for Cornwall's European Structural and Investment Fund Strategy (SIF) to include 'shovel ready' schemes relating to energy efficiency, which will create jobs and growth. Work on existing housing stock meets this criteria, emphasised Stuart Bourne.

Professor Kevin Elliston, Public Health Consultant at Public Health England, offered funding for this group to continue, establishing an inter-agency network to tackle fuel poverty in Cornwall at a strategic level. Tim Jones pointed out that, although Cornwall already has a Fuel Poverty Task Group, it requires invigorating and combining the two groups would be a way of achieving this.

Conclusion

Cornwall Council will continue to work with Glow Cornwall to help this scheme meet its aspiration of delivering 20,000 energy efficiency measures to Cornish households. Leaders must continue to argue for a proportion of the Public Health budget to be spent on projects like Winter Wellbeing, where agencies work together to look at the bigger picture and long term impacts. Members of the group will continue to lobby for changes to ECO, and for the EU SIF to recognise the economic case for tackling fuel poverty in Cornwall.

Actions:

- Engage other partners, including Kernow Clinical Commissioning Group.
- Explore linkages to the Pioneer Project.
- Strengthen the economic case for fighting fuel poverty and engage with Cornwall's Local Enterprise Partnership.
- Reinvigorate the Fuel Poverty Task Group, drawing down funding from Public Health England.
- Improve the mapping of fuel poverty in Cornwall.
- Work towards better leadership and co-ordination between agencies, promoting others activities and best practice to maximise community take-up and engagement.
- Lobby for changes to the Energy Company Obligation at a national level.
- Report the outcomes of this discussion to the Health and Wellbeing Board.
- The long term aim must be energy security and the elimination of fuel poverty in Cornwall.
- Explore linkages into other funding and intervention programmes including the forthcoming Inclusion Strategy for Cornwall.

The NEA Community Action Award

The event was the result of a Community Action Award for tackling fuel poverty in hard to reach groups, presented to Community Energy Plus on behalf of National Energy Action (NEA), DECC and British Gas.

The award recognised the charity's work in leading the Winter Wellbeing Project in Cornwall. This is a pioneering, multi-agency programme which acts as a safety net for those in fuel poverty who are most at risk from deteriorating health during the colder months due to inadequately heated homes.

NEA helps vulnerable households directly and indirectly to escape the misery of fuel poverty. The organisation is working to ensure that energy efficiency is at the centre of policy making, and that the scandal of cold homes is ended. NEA Community Action Awards help to raise awareness, both of the plight of those living in fuel poverty and of the work of local charities and social enterprise to deliver effective interventions at grassroots level.



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