



**Executive
11 April 2011**

**Report from the Director of
Strategy, Partnerships and
Improvement**

Wards Affected:
ALL

Fuel Poverty and Health Task Group – Final Report

1.0 Summary

- 1.1 This report sets out the findings and recommendations of the Fuel Poverty and Health Task Group that are being presented to the Executive for approval. The report has been considered and endorsed by the Health Partnerships Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1 The Executive is recommended to approve the Fuel Poverty and Health Task Group's recommendations.

3.0 Details

- 3.1 The Fuel Poverty and Health Task Group was established to look at the effect that fuel poverty has on peoples' health in Brent. It has been demonstrated in various research projects that fuel poverty and its consequences can have a major impact on physical and mental health and well being. There are also specific factors in Brent that led to the selection of this topic, such as the high proportion of housing in the private rented sector (where the proportion of households in fuel poverty is highest), the relative deprivation of the borough, particularly income deprivation and the general health inequalities that exist in Brent
- 3.2 This work was part of a wider scrutiny project in North West London that considered the relationship between housing and health inequalities. Funding was provided by the Centre for Public Scrutiny to support this work, and Brent's report will be used in a tool kit to assist other councils carrying out

housing and health inequalities scrutiny reviews. The other boroughs taking part in this work, and their work areas were:

- Health and the Built Environment – Hounslow and Hammersmith and Fulham
- Fuel Poverty/Energy Efficiency – Brent and Ealing
- Overcrowding – Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster
- Overcrowding and its impact on children's educational – Hillingdon

3.3 In order to carry out their review the Fuel Poverty and Health Task Group:

- Carried out a review of literature and discussions with housing and health providers on the links between fuel poverty and health;
- Reviewed the means (i.e. grants and income maximisation advice) currently available to both residents and landlords to promote energy efficiency and reduce fuel poverty, of the various agencies involved, and what the take up of these services are;
- Reviewed fuel poverty and affordable warmth strategies currently in place and best practice examples;
- Discussed fuel poverty and health with local energy agencies;
- Held discussions with housing departments and providers on the actions used to promote energy efficiency in social and council housing, and how private sector households in fuel poverty are targeted and reached;
- Discussed with GPs and local health service providers referrals to advice on fuel poverty and affordable warmth. They also considered hospital admissions data for illnesses connected to cold homes and fuel poverty, including the costs to the health service of these admissions;
- Consulted with residents by carrying out a survey to learn more about the effects of fuel poverty on peoples' health and wellbeing.

3.4 The members of the task group were:

- Councillor Janice Long (chair)
- Councillor Margaret McLennan
- Councillor Wilhelmina Mitchell-Murray
- Councillor Claudia Hector
- Councillor Reg Colwill
- Councillor Michael Adeyeye

3.5 The key learning points from the review were:

- There is much work happening in Brent to tackle fuel poverty. Brent is fortunate to have a local charity, Energy Solutions that works on fuel poverty issues in our borough and brings its expertise to this issue.
- Commitment from the health service in Brent to tackle fuel poverty is mixed. There are some very committed individuals who are working

extremely hard to give the issue a higher profile. But the local NHS does not regard fuel poverty as a corporate priority.

- As with many issues, especially in the current financial climate, fuel poverty cannot be the responsibility of one organisation – it has to be tackled in a collaborative way by the council, NHS, voluntary sector and private sector. The role of the energy firms could be increasingly important as grant funding to tackle fuel poverty (such as Warm Zones) is being cut. Energy firms will be expected to step in and provide funding for carbon reduction and energy efficiency measures in the home, which will help to alleviate fuel poverty.
- Income maximisation is key to addressing fuel poverty. Fuel poverty is another facet of general poverty. The importance of giving people (especially the elderly and vulnerable) the means to afford to heat their home cannot be overstated. If people are entitled to benefits but they are not claiming them they need to be given the assistance to do this.

3.6 The task group believes that the key challenges to address fuel poverty are:

- Replacing the funding for fuel poverty mitigation work, as Warm Zone funding has been significantly reduced following the Comprehensive Spending Review. Will funding be replaced by energy companies, and will it be available for fuel poverty mitigation or to reduce carbon emissions from households, as the two are different?
- Ensuring that frontline staff are aware of fuel poverty and any referral network put in place to help signpost people to advice and guidance where needed.
- Getting organisational buy-in to fuel poverty as an issue to ensure support for initiatives to address it from the council, NHS, voluntary and private sector companies in Brent.

3.7 The task group has developed 13 recommendations that it hopes can be approved by the Executive. The members of the task group are of the view that these recommendations can make a positive contribution to addressing fuel poverty in Brent. The recommendations are:

Recommendation 1 – The task group recommends that Energy Solutions and Brent Council's Voluntary Sector Team work with advice providers in Brent to develop a consistent and co-ordinated fuel debt advice service in Brent.

Recommendation 2 – The task group recommends that Brent Council's Housing Policy Team works with Energy Solutions and local RSLs to help broker an agreement for Energy Solutions to be compensated for providing fuel debt advice for housing association tenants in Brent.

Recommendation 3 – Recommendation 3 – The task group recommends that officers in the council's Environmental Projects and Policy Team work

with Energy Solutions to monitor the emerging funding and policy environment in relation to fuel poverty, so that Brent is able to respond to new funding opportunities if they become available post April 2012.

Recommendation 4 – The task group recommends that the council does not arrange for installation of pre-payment energy meters in its properties or properties used for temporary accommodation and instead refers the tenants and residents that request this service to Energy Solutions for advice on energy efficiency and fuel debt.

Recommendation 5 – The task group recommends that officers in the council's Environmental Projects and Policy Team works with officers from NHS Brent and North West London NHS Hospitals Trust to resurrect the planned fuel poverty and health campaign and implement this in Brent.

Recommendation 6 – The task group recommends that the council continues to require landlords to provide properties with at least a D rating under the Energy Performance Certificate system before it is used for temporary accommodation or housing for people placed by the council. This standard should be enforced even if pressure on private sector properties increases as a result of changes to housing benefit rules, and if the council needs to use properties outside of Brent to place people.

Recommendation 7 – The task group recommends that Brent Private Tenants Rights Group presents the findings from its mystery shopping of landlords to the appropriate overview and scrutiny committee to see if the council should be taking additional action as a result of this work.

Recommendation 8 – The task group recommends that NHS Brent and GPs work to include a question on fuel poverty in their screening of over 75s, to help track the extent of the problem and to refer them to appropriate advice. This could be done on a trial basis and if successful rolled out across the borough.

Recommendation 9 – The task group recommends that staff from NHS Brent and North West London NHS Hospitals Trust work with Energy Solutions, supported by the council, to develop an appropriate referral pathway for patients who are suspected of being in fuel poverty. The referral pathway should involve as wide a range of organisations as possible and could build on the Hot Spots scheme that already exists in Brent. Energy Solutions should be appropriately funded by the NHS for facilitating a referral network.

Recommendation 10 – The task group recommends that North West London NHS Hospitals Trust investigates the possibility of running fuel poverty advice sessions with Energy Solutions at their respiratory clinics. Energy Solutions should be funded to carry out this work.

Recommendation 11 – The task group recommends that Brent Council, with partners, develop an affordable warmth strategy for Brent to enable the borough to develop a coherent and focussed plan to tackle fuel poverty within existing resources.

Recommendation 12 – The task group recommends that Brent Council considers the feasibility of undertaking a stock condition survey in order to produce a more accurate picture of fuel poverty in the borough and a basis from which to chart measures put in place to tackle it.

Recommendation 13 – The task group recommends that Brent's Local Strategic Partnership hosts a fuel poverty event to begin to address the wider issues outlined in this report and to promote the partnership approach involving the council, NHS and voluntary sector to bring more people out of fuel poverty.

4.0 Financial Implications and Service Area Response

- 4.1 Responses to each of the recommendations have been received from the relevant service areas, and these are included as an appendix to this report.
- 4.2 There are cost implications to a number of the recommendations, which are outlined in the service area responses. The Executive should be aware that recommendation 12 in particular has a significant cost implication (a standard stock condition survey would cost in the region of £50,000) which may prohibit implementation at this stage, although an alternative proposal is suggested by the Housing and Community Care Department. The Policy Teams in Housing and Community Care and Environment and Neighbourhood Services are responsible for a number of the recommendations and have indicated that they can be taken forward within existing resources.
- 4.3 Recommendation 6 relates to the energy performance rating of properties used by the council to place people in temporary accommodation. It is a symptom of the changes that will be introduced around housing benefit that we can't guarantee that all temporary accommodation used in the future will be at least a D rating under the Energy Performance Certificate system.
- 4.4 Some of the recommendations relate specifically to the NHS and voluntary sector in Brent. Assuming these are endorsed by the Executive, the Health Partnerships Overview and Scrutiny Committee will follow these up in six months time to check on their implementation.

5.0 Legal Implications

- 5.1 There are no legal implications with the report as there is no legislation or government advice to follow in relation to fuel poverty. However it is within our power to fulfil the tasks set out in the recommendations by virtue of section 111 of the Local Government Act 1972 and section 2 of the Local Government Act 2000.

6.0 Diversity Implications

- 6.1 None

7.0 Staffing/Accommodation Implications (if appropriate)

7.1 None

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