



## **PRESS RELEASE**

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### **Fighting Fuel Poverty**

In rural settings it is estimated more than 1 in 4 households are struggling to keep their homes warm. Cumbria Rural Forum (CRF), working with Action with Communities in Cumbria (ACT), hosted a recent conference in Thirlmere, looking at the impact of fuel poverty on Cumbria's rural communities and some of the positive actions taken to combat it.

Des O'Halloran, CRF Chairman, introduced the conference which was also a celebration of their 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. He commented on how increased fuel prices, old housing stock, greater travelling distances and a lack of access to mains gas supplies are leading to an increase in the county's rural population facing fuel poverty – the situation where a household has to spend more than 10% of its disposable income, after housing costs, on domestic fuel.

Roger Roberts, ACT Chief Executive said “the prices of oil and gas have proved very volatile in recent months. However, current falling prices must be seen in the context of inevitable long-term increases that reflect increasing divergence between world-wide demand and supply.”

National Energy Action (NEA), a national charity, based in the north east, campaigns on fuel poverty and energy efficiency. It's Director for Business Development, Joanne Carr, reported to the Conference on their recent national research and work being undertaken in Cumbria to identify communities most at risk; “Many causes of fuel poverty are common to both rural and urban areas, low incomes, high energy prices and energy inefficient housing. But the degree to which these drivers contribute to fuel poverty varies.”

“4.2 million households in villages, hamlets and more remote areas in England are twice as likely to be in fuel poverty than urban areas or countryside towns. Those most at risk are the elderly, long term sick, disabled and young children.”

A critical aspect of fuel poverty concerns its impact on health. Julie Owens, Public Health Specialist with NHS Cumbria helped delegates to understand the particular relationship between fuel poverty and increased winter deaths.

“The UK has 25-30,000 excess winter deaths each year, related to colder weather; 40% due to cardiovascular disease and around a third from respiratory disease.” The majority

of those affected are older people in the 75+ age group. Poorly heated homes also result in reduced mobility, increases in falls and accidents in the home and mental and social health problems such as isolation.

Ms Owens commented that tackling fuel poverty and its effects needs co-ordinated action across agencies, based around the targeting of joint resources in priority areas and the application of good practice from projects around the country.

To help target activity NEA has been working with Impact Housing, one of Cumbria's social landlords, to identify those wards where households are most at risk. Rod Yeoman, Environmental Projects Manager at Impact Housing Association, spoke about their work to improve the thermal efficiency of its homes and to provide tenants with easy access to advice and support.

Impact Housing is also setting up Impact Affordable Energy, an Cumbrian Energy Services Company (ESCo), which will offer advice and support, energy efficiency improvements to buildings, access to discounted energy tariffs and support for community-based renewable energy production.

Mr Yeoman discussed with delegates the practical schemes Impact Housing hopes to implement within the next 12 months including the installation of district heating to two isolated rural communities using wood-chip, a sustainable and low carbon fuel source. "These schemes which will serve both Impact Housing and privately-owned properties in Thirlmere and Eskdale are hoped to deliver heating and hot water at about 65-70% of current costs."

Delegates later went to visit the site in Thirlmere where work to prepare the wood-fired district heating system is due to start in spring 2009. Strong local involvement throughout the project has included village environment open days and trips to see other renewable energy projects with residents and local councillors selecting who will supply and install the boiler and pipe work.

A key factor in rural Cumbria is the age of housing stock and the difficulty involved in improving its thermal efficiency. To help understand these problems, delegates had the opportunity to question Darren Ward of Red Raven Design Ltd and Colin Atkinson of Impact Housing. Simple steps such as increasing loft insulation and the lagging of hot water tanks represent an important first step. Key challenges in rural Cumbria such as improving the thermal efficiency of solid-walled housing are difficult and costly to resolve, yet important because walls represent the greatest source of heat loss.

Richard Suddaby of Cumbria Action for Sustainability (CAfS) emphasised the growing need for local sustainable solutions for energy generation and improvements in efficiency. Underlying the critical importance of harnessing local voluntary activity Mr Suddaby commented that "amazing things are possible with effective local involvement".

For more information about the Cumbria Rural Forum Fuel Poverty in Cumbria event, please contact Dani Hudson at Action with Communities in Cumbria (ACT) on Tel: 01768 869511 or Email: [danihudson@cumbriaaction.org.uk](mailto:danihudson@cumbriaaction.org.uk)

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**Photo:**



Joanne Carr, Director for Business Development at National Energy Action, and Des O'Halloran, Cumbria Rural Forum Chairman cut the cake at Cumbria Rural Forum's 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Event.

**Further press information available from:**

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**Notes to Editors:**

**Action with Communities in Cumbria**

(Previously known as Voluntary Action Cumbria)

- ACT is Cumbria's Rural Community Council and a registered charity.
- ACT is working with people and communities to improve the quality of life in rural Cumbria.
- ACT is an independent organisation able to work with a wide range of partners on an open and equitable basis.
- Established in 1948, for 60 years ACT has been supporting communities that are socially, economically and environmentally vibrant where the needs of all are considered.
- To find out more information, please visit ACT's website: [www.cumbriaaction.org.uk](http://www.cumbriaaction.org.uk)
- **Please note, this website is currently being built, information can be found at our old website [www.ruralcumbria.org.uk](http://www.ruralcumbria.org.uk)**