



## Cumbria Rural Forum – Rural Briefing

*In December 2008, Cumbria Rural Forum, working with Action with Communities in Cumbria, hosted a conference that explored the impact of **fuel poverty** on the County's rural communities. Delegates at the event heard presentations that described the national and regional context and the adverse health impacts, especially on older people. The event included positive messages about the way in which Impact Housing, one of Cumbria's social landlords, is developing initiatives to help moderate fuel costs and some of the actions that communities are taking. The conference also provided opportunities to talk to buildings experts about the techniques and costs associated with adapting existing homes to improve their thermal efficiency.*

### Fuel Poverty in Cumbria

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.

The consequence for residents of Cumbria's rural communities will be increasing domestic fuel costs and an increasing number of households experiencing fuel poverty. This is the situation where a household has to spend more than 10% of its disposable income, after housing costs, on domestic fuel.

### The National & Regional Context

National Energy Action (NEA) is a national charity, based in the north east, which campaigns on fuel poverty and energy efficiency. Its Director for Business Development, Joanne Carr, delivered key messages from national data and also work being undertaken in Cumbria to identify those communities most at risk.

Key points identified by Joanne concerning the situation in England included:

- a dramatic increase in fuel poverty over the last four years, numbers rising from 1.5m to 5.6m households affected between 2004 and 2008;
- in 2008 more than 25% of rural households were struggling to keep their homes warm, twice the level found in urban communities;
- about 50% of households affected are those of elderly or disabled people, whose pensions and benefits have not kept pace with rising living costs;
- there were 22,500 excess winter deaths in 2006/7, those most at risk being the elderly, long-term sick, disabled and young children.

Key factors that influence the level of fuel poverty - and which mean that it is especially high in rural Cumbria - include:

- the high proportion of older housing (over 75% in some wards);
- lack of access to lower cost fuels and consequent reliance on oil and bottled gas;
- the high cost of introducing energy efficiency measures in small and scattered rural communities;
- higher levels of under occupancy; and
- low household incomes for those dependent on rural employment

To help target activity NEA has been working with Impact Housing to identify those wards where households are most at risk. Drawing on data for house types, property ownership and the indices of multiple deprivation this identifies 59 priority wards where there is a probability that households will be at greater risk. Many of those identified are in the rural and more remote parts of the County.

#### ~ Pause for Thought ~

- Rural residents are more than twice as likely to be affected by fuel poverty than their urban counterparts.
- There are about 22,500 additional deaths each winter in England attributable to fuel poverty.
- A range of factors mean that levels of fuel poverty are high in national terms in Cumbria's rural communities.
- Elderly, sick and disabled people are especially vulnerable both to fuel poverty and the adverse health impacts associated with it.
- Significant numbers of rural residents who rely on oil for heating cannot afford to switch their systems on.

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## The Health Impacts

A critical aspect of fuel poverty concerns its impact upon health. To help delegates understand this relationship Julie Owens, Public Health Specialist with NHS Cumbria summarised the issues.

There is a particular relationship between fuel poverty and increased winter deaths, especially those resulting from cardiovascular and respiratory disease. A majority of those affected are older people in the 75+ age group, particularly significant for Cumbria where the number of older people is rising rapidly.

Poorly heated homes also result in reduced mobility, increases in falls and accidents in the home and mental and social health problems (e.g. isolation).

In Cumbria, the level of excess winter deaths varies yearly and between Districts, with higher levels in different Districts in different years (e.g. Eden & South Lakeland – 2003/4, Barrow – 2004/5, Copeland – 2006/7).

Tackling fuel poverty and its affects needs co-ordinated action by public and third sector partners, based around the targeting of joint resources in priority areas and the application of good practice such as that of the “Rights to Warmth” project in County Durham.

## Tackling the Causes

Impact Housing (IH) was represented at the event by Rod Yeoman, Environmental Projects Manager. Rod explained two complementary groups of activity being developed by IH to respond to the way in which its tenants are affected by or are dropping in to fuel poverty.

As a social landlord IH is working to improve the thermal efficiency of its homes and also to provide its tenants with easy access to advice and support. To further the help it can offer IH is investigating the possibility of setting up an Energy Services Company that will be able to offer advice and support, energy efficiency improvements to buildings, access to discounted energy tariffs and support for community-based renewable energy production.

Rod later talked to delegates about practical schemes that IH hopes to implement within the next twelve months. These will involve the installation of district heating to two isolated rural communities using wood chip, a sustainable and low carbon fuel source. These cutting-edge

schemes, which will serve both IH and privately-owned properties in Thirlmere and Eskdale, are aimed to deliver heating and hot water to occupiers at about 65-70% of current costs.

## Community Action

Richard Suddaby of Cumbria Action for Sustainability (CAfS) emphasised the growing need for local sustainable solutions for energy generation and improvements in efficiency. These are needed both to tackle climate change and to even out some of the social inequalities that are the root cause of fuel poverty.

Examples of local action he described included the use of more efficient heating systems and better insulation. He also used thermal imaging to show how necessary improvements can be identified and targeted by home owners. In highlighting the value of local solutions Richard commented that “amazing things are possible with effective local involvement”.

## Adapting Existing Housing

Delegates had the opportunity to question Darren Ward of Red Raven Design Ltd and Colin Atkinson of Impact Housing about ways in which the thermal efficiency of existing housing can be improved.

Illustrating the point with a case study relating to a solid-walled house it was shown that simple steps such as increasing loft insulation and the lagging of hot water tanks represent an important first step. However, 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.

More efficient heating can make a significant contribution to both energy and liveability, with very efficient modern boilers and closed solid fuel stoves (as opposed to open fires) giving significant improvements to SAP ratings.

### The conference Speakers were:

- Joanne Carr, National Energy Action.
- Julie Owens, NHS Cumbria.
- Rod Yeoman, Impact Housing.
- Richard Suddaby, CAfS.
- Darren Ward, Red Raven Design Ltd.
- Colin Atkinson, Impact Housing.

You can contact the speakers through **ACT** and their presentations are available on our website.

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**For further details about the Cumbria Rural Forum, contact Dani Hudson at ACT on 01768 869511 or e-mail [danihudson@cumbriaaction.org.uk](mailto:danihudson@cumbriaaction.org.uk)**

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