

Fuel poverty and the Warm Homes Programme

Summary of engagement

Monday, 21 March 2022

As part of the Equality and Social Justice Committee's inquiry into '*Fuel poverty and the Warm Homes Programme*', the Citizen Engagement Team proposed a qualitative approach to engagement, comprising a series of one-to-one interviews with individuals with experience of the Warm Homes Programme, individuals in or at risk of fuel poverty, and private sector landlords.

Nineteen one-to-one interviews and one online focus group took place between 3 February – 10 March 2022. In total, twenty two contributors across all Senedd regions, in both urban and rural areas, shared their views.

Contributors

Contributor composition varied and included social tenants, private tenants, private landlords and owner occupiers.

For those with experience of the Warm Homes Programme, some had experience of both Nest and Arbed schemes, whilst others had experience of only one. Some contributors were considered ineligible for the Programme, some were currently in the midst of their experience with the Programme, and others had concluded their experience with the Programme.

Contributors were sourced through a number of community groups and organisations including Age Cymru, Bevan Foundation, Disability Wales, South Riverside Community Development Centre and Swansea Poverty Truth Commission. A number of contributors were pre-existing contacts, whilst responded to posts on the Senedd's social media channels.

Thank you to everyone who contributed to the programme of engagement.

Format

Eleven online interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams, with a further eight interviews conducted by telephone. One focus group was held on Zoom. Some contributors were supported by representatives from organisations/groups, with which they were associated, although these representatives mostly participated in a passive role.



The format of engagement was largely comparable across the interviews and focus group, but varied slightly to respond to the views, experiences and ideas shared by contributors.

The following themes emerged from the discussions.

Experiences of fuel poverty

“When you’re fifty plus and you’ve got to go to your father and say ‘dad, can I have some money so I can put it on the meter’. My dad died last July so that safety net isn’t really there. So this year is going to be a real struggle . . . ”

Social tenant, Swansea.

Many contributors shared the challenges they faced when managing their energy consumption, and the steps often taken to minimise the impact of energy use on their income. Those who identified as living in, or at risk of fuel poverty, explained that they would often avoid using large household appliances as much as possible, and would regularly wear extra layers of clothing to avoid heating their home.

“Because of my smart meter, I’ve been able to notice what things make the bigger impact. So I’ve got various vents on the walls for different purposes, but just turning those on, the spike in energy price is just not worth it, so I’d rather open a window. I boil the kettle as little as possible and barely use my microwave now. It’s that expensive . . . with the projected increase in energy costs that’s something that’s quite anxiety-inducing, so I’m trying to reduce my spending in other ways to try and prepare for that.”

Social tenant, Swansea.

Rationing the use of heating is a regular occurrence for many contributors who adapt their heating habits depending on their circumstances. This was perhaps most starkly illustrated by a contributor who explained that her sister, who has cancer, would soon be coming to stay with her. She would therefore need to make some adjustments prior to her stay to ensure that her sister was comfortable.

“. . . she’s planning on staying with me to have radiotherapy treatment at our local hospital. So I’ve not had our heating on as much in readiness to bank a bit for when she’s here.”

Nest and Arbed scheme beneficiary, Conwy.

“. . . I might put heating on for an hour, shut the door and put one rad on just in the main room I use, just to take the chill off. And I’m very quick to open the door when I go out (of the room).”

Social tenant, Swansea.

The rising cost of living and projected increase in energy costs were frequently referenced by contributors when discussing their concerns for the future. Many explained that they were already acutely aware of their energy use and feared that any further adjustments would mean choosing between heating and eating.

“Food is my biggest worry because I like to make sure that I can provide a decent meal for my son. . . I’ve already used the food bank more times than I’m allowed to use for the next 6 months. So with the rising cost in energy, not being able to use the food bank; it is going to be the choice of whether I heat the house or eat.”

Social tenant, Swansea.

One private landlord explained that, in his experience, private landlords are increasingly conscious of the energy efficiency of their properties, as a warm home will often mean happier, long-term tenants. He is currently in the process of upgrading some of his properties, but explained that the pandemic has had an impact on the financial situation of many private landlords.

The positive impact of the Warm Homes Programme

“I thought I was waiting a long time between filling the form and them contacting me, but once the process started it was very rapid, and it was efficient”

Arbed scheme beneficiary, Rhondda Cynon Taf.

Some contributors shared positive experiences of the Warm Homes Programme, explaining that its impact on their fuel costs, as well as their health and wellbeing had been transformative. Frequent references were made to feeling “grateful” for the energy efficiency improvements made to their home.

This impact was powerfully articulated by contributors with health issues/and or disabilities, who explained that, whilst a reduction in fuel costs was welcome, the marked improvement in their health and wellbeing was invaluable.

Case study A

Location: Newport.

Property: Owner-occupied, 1950s, stone-built, semi-detached house.

Measures installed: New boiler and new radiators.

Cast study A shared a glowing account of his experience with the Nest scheme. At the time he first contacted Nest, he was recovering from heart surgery and suffered from a number of health issues, which meant he was particularly susceptible to the cold. He satisfied the eligibility criteria for a package of energy efficiency measures. He described the experience with Nest as “*excellent*”, elaborating that he “*couldn’t praise them any more.*”

For those who cited a reduction in fuel costs as the main benefit of the energy efficiency improvements made to their home, the extent of the reduction was described as “*significant*” by a number of contributors. One contributor explained that her elderly parents, based in Rhondda Cynon Taf, had received solar panels as part of the Arbed scheme and had subsequently seen their energy bills halve. Another contributor, who benefitted from the Nest scheme, described the impact of the changes as “*incredible.*”

“It’s got better (fuel bills) since I had the Nest upgrades . . . the work Nest did for me has made a difference. So I would say they were £250 a month easily before I had the Nest scheme done. They fitted an air source heat pump for me under the government funding and that has reduced my bills down massively. So in the summer they’ve dropped down to about £40 a month, whereas in the winter they’re about £190 a month, which is good.”

Nest and Arbed scheme beneficiary, Conwy.

“The central heating is much more efficient, whereas we used to have an old tank system we now have a nicer looking system and it’s more efficient. Heating and temperature control is really good.”

Arbed scheme beneficiary, Rhondda Cynon Taf.

Negative experiences of the Warm Homes Programme

A number of contributors shared negative experiences of the Warm Homes Programme, although these predominantly concerned the Arbed scheme. Whilst all contributors with experience of Arbed welcomed the principle of the scheme and its associated benefits, its operation was criticised on a number of fronts.

Case study B

Location: Conwy.

Property: 1960s, stone-built house, part-owned through a government scheme.

Measures installed: Solar panels under the Arbed scheme. Full air source heat pump system and radiators under the Nest scheme.

Case study B is a single mother living in a rural community with no mains gas. She had a positive experience of the Nest scheme, but was critical of a number of aspects of the Arbed scheme. In her view, the main issue was Arbed *“not having a clear vision for people.”*

“. . . they wouldn't reply to e-mails, they would only speak on the phone, they wouldn't put anything in writing. They dragged and dragged their heels.”

Communication, or lack thereof, was identified as a significant issue by most contributors with experience of Arbed. Many were frustrated when they felt Arbed was unable to provide transparent justification for decisions taken, particularly when some would benefit from the scheme, whilst others in similar circumstances, would not. One participant explained that this could create a sense of division amongst communities.

“People were just desperate to get something and again, communication with Arbed was awful. Houses on certain streets were offered solar panels. They were initially putting ten to twelve on some houses. They then scaled that down and capped it at eight, after they'd already fitted ten to twelve on some properties . . . so that caused difficulties because some had more than others . . . to be honest, it really felt like they didn't know what they were doing.”

Arbed scheme beneficiary, Conwy.

“I would say that the solar panels are useless. They don't store energy and they don't give the energy back to the grid, so they're only any good on a sunny day and on a sunny day you don't use as much electricity. For instance, on a day like today, we'd want to use the tumble dryer, but we're not generating any electricity because it's a cloudy day.”

Arbed scheme beneficiary, Rhondda Cynon Taf.

Mixed experiences of the Warm Homes Programme

“Nest were really good but my neighbour applied recently and since she's applied they've gone a little upside down. She's been waiting for about nine months and they're only using companies from south Wales to come all the way

up to north Wales. I've been waiting for a service on my air pump heater since November with Nest and I've phoned them four times and they're bringing a company all the way from south Wales, when it was a company 15 minutes down the road that fitted it."

Nest scheme beneficiary, Conwy.

Most contributors with experience of the Nest scheme were largely positive about its operation and associated benefits, emphasising that they were appreciative of the support received. However, some suggested the scheme could be improved with “*some tweaking*”, in the words of one contributor. Some of these suggestions included ensuring that timescales for delivery were reasonable, and to suggest that the scheme could include smart home technology to manage energy use.

Case study C

Location: Blaenau Gwent

Property: Owner occupied, stone-built, terraced cottage.

Case study C's experience with Nest is currently ongoing. He has recently had a technical survey on his property and is awaiting contact with confirmation of next steps. However, this is the second technical survey he has had but was not told why a second needed to be done. He said that his neighbour's experience with Nest took 12 weeks, but he is a year down the line and the process is still ongoing.

For those with positive experiences of the Arbed scheme overall, any criticism largely focused on perceived inconsistencies in approach, which one contributor suggested could be attributed to the approach taken by sub-contractors responsible for the work.

Case study D

Location: Rhondda Cynon Taf.

Property: Owner-occupied, stone-built, terraced house.

Measures installed: New radiators and light bulbs.

Case study D explained that she had qualified for energy efficiency measures under the Arbed scheme and described her overall experience

as “very good”. Under the scheme, she received ten new radiators but when she asked for a double radiator, she was told this would not be possible as they would need to be replaced “like for like.” However, she said that the information given to a neighbour, who also benefitted from the scheme, differed.

Some contributors discussed the work undertaken by sub-contractors responsible for installing the energy efficiency measures, expressing confusion regarding how the work was approached. However, some were positive about the impact on local communities.

“My next door neighbour, who I told about it (the Arbed scheme) – her application was after mine, but hers (the installation of measures) was done a couple of weeks before mine, but it was done by a different company. So although we’re next door to each other, we had different companies dealing with it, which I thought was a bit strange. I thought it wasn’t very efficient because you had two companies coming out . . . surely, if we were next door they should have used one company to do the two houses. You can see the difference, because they had different solar panels to us.”

Arbed scheme beneficiary, Rhondda Cynon Taf.

“The good thing about Arbed is that they used local contractors, so it was all local scaffolding companies that did the work, so that was a bonus. There was a huge amount of work here with scaffolders, so they definitely put money in the local pot.”

Arbed and Nest scheme beneficiary, Conwy.

“It was shocking, but that’s because of the lack of oversight on the contractors. They were absolutely awful.”

Arbed scheme beneficiary, Ceredigion.

Awareness of the Warm Homes Programme

Most contributors with experience of the Warm Homes Programme said that awareness of the programme amongst the general public was low. A number of contributors explained that they became aware of the programme “by chance”, having found out through friends, by working for an organisation like Citizens Advice, or by attending an event at which Nest and/or Arbed representatives were present.

Case study E

Location: Rhondda Cynon Taf.

Property: Owner-occupied, stone-built, terraced house.

Measures installed: New boiler, new central heating system and solar panels.

Case study E attended an open day at her local community centre where she ran into former colleagues who informed her that she may be eligible for energy efficiency improvements through the Arbed scheme.

“We didn’t get informed as a community in writing; no posters, there was no information. I was lucky that I just happened to be there and know these people I used to work with . . . we’d already had three central heating people to give estimates and we were almost ready to employ someone to do the job for us, and it was just pure luck we went to that event. I just feel a lot of my neighbours would have been eligible and didn’t know about it. . . it was the luck of the draw and it shouldn’t be like that . . .”

There was general consensus amongst contributors with experience of the Warm Homes Programme, that more should be done to raise awareness of schemes for which people may be eligible. Some contributors also explained that people consume information in different ways and it was therefore important to promote the programme through different channels.

“Some people who did hear about it, thought it was some kind of con because it was being offered for free. They didn’t think you could have anything free and they didn’t apply . . . because it was called ‘Arbed’ they didn’t identify it as a council or a government scheme. I think the name didn’t give people confidence in it and if the letters came from the government, they would believe in it.”

Arbed scheme beneficiary, Rhondda Cynon Taf.

Improving the Warm Homes Programme

A number of contributors shared their ideas on how the Warm Homes Programme could be improved. Whilst it was generally accepted that criteria was necessary to assess an individual’s eligibility for the Programme, some contributors were of the view that its application often seemed inconsistent.

One contributor explained that in her view, the eligibility criteria for the Arbed scheme was applied too rigidly, which meant that some of those in the greatest need, missed out. Some contributors were adamant that any new iteration of the Arbed scheme should also include windows and doors, even if part funded, as any benefit gained from

installing energy efficiency measures is lost if there are deficiencies elsewhere in the property.

“In terms of criteria, when they were saying it was down to EPC – it has to move three points on EPC to make it worthwhile, or to fit with the Welsh Government’s criteria. That’s all well and good for Welsh Government, but just lifting that property by one letter could make a difference to that person’s bill by £20 - £30 a month . . . they were saying to those people “it’s not enough”, but for those people it was something . . .”

Arbed and Nest scheme beneficiary, Conwy.

“I don’t think from what I’ve heard, the Arbed scheme targeted the people in the greatest need because it seemed to be, people who were a little savvy like myself heard about it and were able to access it. But I really don’t think it targeted the poorest people . . . we’re not rich, but we were about to pay for it (a new central heating system) anyway, but we were lucky to have it free.”

Arced scheme beneficiary, Rhondda Cynon Taf.

One participant who had a negative experience of the Arbed scheme, was of the view that a number of changes were needed to ensure the scheme met its intended purpose. These changes focused on establishing an “*example village*”. The participant explained that all properties which had received a suite of energy efficiency measures during the first phase, should be re-surveyed and a quality baseline identified. Additional measures, such as further panels, energy storage, insulation and resident engagement plans, could then be introduced during a second phase. The intention would be to establish a blueprint to be followed in other areas.

Case study F

Location: Conwy

Property: 1920s stone /brick property with a slate unfelted roof and oil heating.

Measures installed: Solar panels.

Case study F shared his experience of the Arbed scheme.

“The 8 panels fitted are insufficient to improve the energy efficiency of the property. If the property has poor doors, poor windows, poor roofing felt or none, poor insulation and further inefficiencies leading to heat loss then any benefit proposed by solar panels will be negated if these

aspects are not corrected. In addition, a property located at the top of a hill as in my case and open to major winter elements, is not similar to a property on lower ground and centred on an estate. Many properties in Wales are in exposed locations, something that should be mentioned in an EPC."