

Introduction

Age Cymru is the leading charity working to improve the lives of all older people in Wales. We believe older people should be able to lead healthy and fulfilled lives, have adequate income, access to high quality services and the opportunity to shape their own future. We seek to provide a strong voice for all older people in Wales and to raise awareness of the issues of importance to them.

We are pleased to respond to the National Assembly for Wales' Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee's inquiry into fuel poverty.

The scale and impacts of fuel poverty in Wales

Older people are the group most likely to suffer from fuel poverty, where having to spend a disproportionate amount on fuel takes money away from other essentials. A contributing factor is that older people tend to live in older, energy inefficient properties.

Figures released by the ONS show that over the winter of 2017–18 there were 3,400 excess winter deaths in Wales among people aged 65 and over, which is a huge increase on the previous year's figure of 1,800. (Excess winter deaths compare the number of deaths between December and March to those during the rest of the year). Last year was a particularly cold winter but it is still a real concern when so many of these deaths are preventable. We estimate that, each winter, more than a third of the excess winter deaths are caused by respiratory

diseases. In vulnerable groups such as older people, influenza can lead to life-threatening complications. A combination of poor housing, high energy prices and ill health can make winter a dangerous time for many older people. It is vitally important to ensure that our older population stays warm and well throughout the harsh winter months.

How the Welsh Government action to dates has helped to combat fuel poverty, in particular, the input of the Warm Homes Programme (including Nest and Arbed) and the Welsh Quality Housing Standard.

The Welsh Government's continued commitment to funding an energy efficiency programme specifically aimed at reaching fuel poor households has been extremely welcome. We welcomed the Welsh Government's announcement in 2017 regarding £104 million investment over the following four years to increase the number of energy efficient homes.¹ However, the Welsh Government's pledge to eradicate fuel poverty will be unachievable without a new fuel poverty strategy that is underpinned by further investment to ensure all older people live in warm, affordable homes.

Age Cymru Advice has been a referral partner of Nest for five years. We have received over 200 referrals from Nest, and directly referred about 150 individuals to them. We also promote the Nest scheme to older people every autumn, as part of our Spread the Warmth campaign. In south and mid Wales, we refer to Western Power Distribution who offer a home visiting service to check eligibility for all the fuel poverty assistance schemes, including Nest.

It is important that those people that contact Nest, but are found to be ineligible for the Nest scheme, are provided with information about any other assistance schemes that may be available, for example any utility company schemes, the Western Power Distribution service (as above). Feedback that we

¹ Welsh Government (2017) £104 million to heat Wales' most vulnerable households. 14 February 2017.

have received from older people indicates that such information is not always provided by Nest.

We welcome the Fuel Poverty Data Linking Project which examines the impact of the Warm Homes Nest Scheme on hospital admissions and general health for recipients of home energy efficiency measures.

The Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) has led to improvements in social housing,² and we believe the commitment to achieving the WHQS should also be extended to the private rented sector and to all new homes being built in Wales. We are supportive of Welsh Government's proposal that all housing irrespective of tenure must have the same quality standards such as space and energy efficiency, with a target set by 2025.³

How the Welsh Government's successor to the fuel poverty strategy (due for consultation in Autumn 2019) should differ from its 2010 strategy

Of the three main factors which cause fuel poverty the Welsh Government only exerts control over the energy efficiency of homes. The others, household income and energy prices, are largely the domain of the UK Government. Ultimately all three must be addressed in order to tackle fuel poverty effectively; however there is still a lot that the Welsh Government can do to mitigate the impact on people in fuel poverty by ensuring that people receive all the financial support and income that they are entitled to and that properties in Wales are as energy efficient as possible. This is also likely to be most sustainable long term solution.

² Welsh Government (2019) Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) as at 31 March 2019. Statistical First Release SDR 91/2019. 3 October 2019. <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2019-10/welsh-housing-quality-standard-31-march-2019-256.pdf>

³ Welsh Government (2019) Independent Review of Affordable Housing Supply – Welsh Government Response to Final Report. <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-07/independent-review-of-affordable-housing-supply-government-response.pdf>

The Welsh Government's most recent Tackling Poverty Action Plan states that it intends to 'build on complementary strategies such as the Fuel Poverty Strategy' but is not intended to take its place. In light of the large numbers of households still living in fuel poverty, the Welsh Government must set out a credible evidence base and clear programme describing how and when it intends to reduce levels of fuel poverty, supported by reasonable timescales.

We believe that the time is right to refresh its strategic approach to tackling fuel poverty, building on the strengths of the current programme. Refreshed data should be central to this as it is simply not possible to state definitively how many households are fuel poor in Wales or where dangerously cold homes can be found. The Welsh Government should ensure that there are regularly updated data on housing stock quality and the annual reporting on fuel poverty levels. Local authorities and other support services would be able to use these data to identify which of their clients' homes could benefit from energy efficiency measures and use it to make referrals to fuel poverty schemes.

What steps the Welsh Government should take to ensure that new-build homes, as well as existing homes, are highly energy efficient to prevent them causing fuel poverty in the future.

Given the likelihood that energy prices will continue to rise, Age Cymru believes that the UK and Welsh Governments must put investment into improving the energy efficiency of the housing stock, beginning with the least energy efficient, funded from the new receipts UK Government will receive from carbon taxes.

We welcome energy efficiency programmes that are able to react quickly in the event of a household experiencing a heating breakdown. All suppliers should have the facility to provide emergency electric heaters, such provision should not be variable or dependent upon demand and geography. We also believe vulnerable households in Wales should have access to a fund for emergency heating. This should operate in circumstances where someone's system fails

during a cold snap and they are unable to get it repaired, if they cannot access liquid gas or heating, or if they are unable to be discharged from hospital because their home is too cold.

As stated above, the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) has led to improvements in social housing,⁴ and we believe the commitment to achieving the WHQS should also be extended to the private rented sector and to all new homes being built in Wales. We are supportive of Welsh Government's proposal that all housing irrespective of tenure must have the same quality standards such as space and energy efficiency, with a target set by 2025.⁵

⁴ Welsh Government (2019) Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) as at 31 March 2019. Statistical First Release SDR 91/2019. 3 October 2019. <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2019-10/welsh-housing-quality-standard-31-march-2019-256.pdf>

⁵ Welsh Government (2019) Independent Review of Affordable Housing Supply – Welsh Government Response to Final Report. <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-07/independent-review-of-affordable-housing-supply-government-response.pdf>