

# SCRUTINY REPORT



**MEETING:** Overview and Scrutiny  
**DATE:** January 2023  
**SUBJECT:** Tackling Fuel Poverty  
**REPORT FROM:** Cllr Cummins  
**CONTACT OFFICER:** Michelle Stott

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## 1.0 BACKGROUND

On the 19 January 2022 a full Council meeting debated a notice of motion in relation to fuel poverty.

The Council noted that:

- 1 Research from Friends of the Earth shows that 13% of households in Bury are living in fuel poverty – and heating homes accounts for 44% of local carbon emissions.
- 2 Rising energy prices will make this significantly worse, and the National Energy Action charity has warned that rising household energy bills could cause at least 2 million more homes to slip into fuel poverty
- 3 All housing in our borough should be insulated to a minimum of EPC C standard with good quality loft insulation, cavity wall insulation, double-glazing and draught exclusion.
- 4 The Government have set a target to upgrade all housing to the above standard by 2030. To meet this target a total of 5,859 homes in Bury would need insulation upgrades each year.
- 5 The scale of this challenge is significant but at the same time we must make a commitment to end fuel poverty and excess carbon emissions from poorly insulated homes and develop a strategy to achieve this goal.

Council therefore committed to:

- 1 Ensure that we are doing what we can as an Authority to provide advice and support to residents struggling through fuel poverty, and specifically ask for the appropriate Cabinet Member to bring a report to meetings of the Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny Committee in the next two months providing an update on the support the Council and its partners are able to offer.

- 2 Strengthen its procedures to enforce minimum standards of energy efficiency in the private rented sector – making sure landlords without an EPC certificate for their properties are fined, and properties with an inadequate EPC rating are prevented from being rented.
- 3 Publish a statement of intent and set locally appropriate eligibility criteria to access Energy Company Obligation funding via Local Authority Flexibility arrangements – allowing more vulnerable and low-income households in our area to access funding to better insulate their homes.
- 4 Ensure new housing is built to the highest possible energy efficiency standards through reviewing Local Plan policies and introducing additional Supplementary Planning Guidance to ensure the use of low-carbon materials, heat pumps rather than gas heating systems, and renewable energy as much as possible.
- 5 Instruct the Chief Executive to write to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs asking that the Government adopt the recommendations relating to retrofitting homes and buildings in the Blueprint for a Green Recovery report published in January 2021.
- 6 Request the appropriate Cabinet Members to bring a report on these wider issues to a future meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee within the next twelve months.

## **2.0 ISSUES**

Since these commitments were made the government has announced an energy price cap freeze meaning the average annual bill will be around £2,500 (£3,000 from April). However, if residents use more, then they will pay more. National Energy Action predicts that even with this support, 6.7 million UK households could be in fuel poverty which is an increase of 2.2 million from last year. The Cost-of-Living Crisis has exacerbated the situation with clients left choosing whether to heat or eat.

According to Sub-Regional Fuel Poverty Data from BEIS the Chesham Fold Estate in Bury is disproportionality affected and has the highest numbers of households in Fuel Poverty reaching a staggering 32.9%. Therefore, the Council has made significant strides to tackle this with the following measures:

### **Anti-Poverty Strategy and Action Plan**

In response to the Cost-of-Living Crisis the Council has established an Anti-Poverty Steering Group consisting of members from organisations whose remit includes activity relevant to influencing the poverty agenda such as:

- 3<sup>rd</sup> Sector Organisations
- Bury Council representatives
- Six Town housing / Registered Providers
- DWP
- CABB
- GM Poverty Action

- People with lived experiences
- Other partners on an ad hoc basis to provide specialist knowledge of particular themes when required

The Group reports to the Health and Wellbeing board and there is a standing item at each meeting for an update of progress. The anti-poverty steering group is chaired by the Director of Public Health.

The objectives of the group are:

- Bring together key stakeholders who have a role to play in contributing to reducing poverty and its impact on Bury residents
- To ensure activities are coordinated for maximum impact and that all partners are supported and adequately resourced to deliver their role
- To raise the profile and awareness of the impact of poverty within the Bury Community, the Council and its services, and partner organisations and what is being done to address this
- To audit what is currently happening to address this issue and identify gaps or areas for development
- To provide oversight and scrutiny when partners are developing/introducing policy and practices related to anti-poverty to ensure an evidence-based approach
- To deliver the action plan which is jointly owned and delivered against by all partner agencies, and which fits within the wider Greater Manchester anti-poverty strategy
- To advocate for regional and national policies which will support the anti-poverty agenda
- To Monitor data, trends related to poverty
- To act as a channel of communication for the development of initiatives tailored to local needs
- To develop a network to share work, research and good practice
- To ensure the work undertaken by the group to address poverty is co-designed by those who have experienced poverty
- To regularly share news around any developments and progress the group has made with relevant partners and the public
- To direct, monitor and evaluate appropriate use of council and national funds eg Household Support Fund

The outcomes of the Group are

- To reduce the levels and impacts of poverty in the Bury population
- To tackle the stigma around socio economic exclusion
- To establish an effective partnership response to preventing and tackling poverty

Since this group was established an Anti-Poverty Strategy has been developed (see background documents) and a Delivery Plan has been developed to ensure a proactive driven approach to tackling Poverty across relevant themes one of which is dedicated to Housing related poverty which includes Fuel Poverty.

Two productive Cost of Living Summits have also been held to provide opportunity to contribute towards the current approach of the Steering Group and identify gaps in the delivery plan. To give space for wider discussion on implications being seen in the community; Hear voices of people experiencing poverty; Identify any groups missing out on support and promote tools and opportunities to access support.

## **Household Support Fund**

The Council has decided to allocate amounts from the latest round of Household Support Fund to assist people with their energy bills –

- Direct provision of vouchers to support energy costs of those known to Bury Council/ NHS Greater Manchester (Bury) of having living equipment which requires electricity – up to £232k
- Direct provision of vouchers to support energy costs for Care leavers up to the age of 25 based on feedback from Children’s Strategic Partnership Board and Corporate Parenting Board – up to £20k

Other categories will be provided with general support which it is also expected is likely to be spent on fuel or food.

- Direct provision of vouchers to those of working age on Council Tax Support and Employment Support Allowance (Income related) but not on Universal Credit – up to £245k
- Ongoing targeted identification of households through public service leads in neighbourhoods (including Early Help and pastoral teams) and trusted referrers (including Bury Community Support Network). Immediate financial support in conjunction with wider financial resilience advice and information. Promotion of support through targeted communication and engagement and connection through Community Hubs where individuals not engaged in wider services – up to £270k.

It is expected, based on earlier rounds of funding that all the above amounts will be spent during the period of the scheme.

## **Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund**

Wave 1 of the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund is being delivered to the Chesham Estate. There are 28 properties in various stages of retrofit works with 10 completed and the programme in progressing well. Solar PV, insulation, LED lighting, window and door replacements and preparations for external wall insulation are all in progress. The scheme includes 100 homes having retrofit energy efficiency work completed and the scheme will be completed by March 2023. Grant funding for this project is £993k with match funding of £370k from the Council.

The SHDF wave 2 has been open for expressions of interest and a further bid from the Council and STH has been submitted for a further 250 homes to have similar fabric first retrofit works completed during the next two financial years. The bid is being submitted as part of a consortium bid with other housing providers in the Northwest and will be submitted by GMCA as the lead organisation. The maximum grant that can be expected is £5,000 per home with match funding provided by the Council through the HRA.

Further updates will be provided once the bid has been assessed and the awards notified.

## **Winter Wellbeing Packs and Home Energy Visits**

Six Town Housing are also producing approximately 200 Winter Wellbeing packs for their most vulnerable tenants which will be distributed throughout December and January. In the past STH have issued packs to mainly elderly tenants but this year they are accepting referrals for:

- Tenants / families who are in debt or struggling financially
- Vulnerable tenants

- Households on low income
- Vulnerable elderly living in the community

The packs will include single quilt or blanket, non-perishable food, warm hats, gloves, socks, thermometers, mini hot water bottle, thermal mug, anti-bac gel, selection box, hot chocolate sachets, plus lots of tips and information on how to save energy costs.

Six Town Housing are also offering home energy advice visits for tenants by an Energy Advisor who will offer sign posting for energy support on fuel bills and saving energy. Data loggers are also utilised to record temperature and humidity over a period within the homes, to identify any underheating or humidity problems. This has resulted in the provision of additional loft insulation or adding radiators in unheated rooms as well as checking cavity wall insulation for any cold spots which may require insulation removal and reinsulating.

## **Damp and Condensation Issues**

The tragic death of Awaab Ishak as a result of the unsatisfactory performance of Rochdale Boroughwide Housing with regards to damp and mould has reiterated the Council's responsibility to residents of Bury not only in social housing but in all tenures. The increase in residents suffering from fuel poverty is likely to increase the number of homes with damp and condensation issues, in part due to residents inadequately heating their homes.

We are keen to prioritise housing standards work across all tenures and are currently exploring all available options to allow us to increase the capacity within the small enforcement team, which includes working with our colleagues at the Combined Authority to help us identify key target areas for proactive intervention, alongside opportunities for growing and developing the team to increase our enforcement capacity and drive-up standards.

We are currently pulling together our data on housing disrepair over the 3 years, but this has also highlighted some issues within our data recording system. This has been acknowledged at a service level and we are currently out to tender for a new IT service provider.

The private rented sector team is the Council's housing enforcement team, and they cover all tenures across private sector housing in the borough. They are responsible for enforcing against poorly performing landlords across the borough in order to drive up standards and administering the mandatory HMO licensing scheme.

With resource levels currently at 1.8 FTE Environmental Health Officers, the team is only able to offer a service that responds to requests for service. Due to this lack of resource, capacity has not allowed any proactive visits. Partnership working is required to order improve housing conditions across the borough with support required from other Council departments, therefore options are being considered.

There are opportunities at a GM Level that we can take advantage of, in order to support and sustain our housing enforcement provision such as the GM Good Landlord Scheme. This is an opportunity for the Council to recruit a suitable candidate for an apprenticeship with a view to becoming a qualified and competent private sector housing enforcement officer after a 3-year training programme. It is the first programme of its kind across GM. The project is being partially funded through GMCA, so offers the Council the ideal opportunity to recruit and train the future workforce at a reduced rate. It had been acknowledged that one of the issues currently facing housing

enforcement across the region is an ageing workforce and lack of junior officers in the sector. This project aims to address that.

In addition, GMCA have recently been awarded £2.1million from DHLUC to implement an enforcement project across the region, to test the theory that improving capacity in enforcement teams can lead to an increase in enforcement and civil penalty fines, which in turn can sustain a housing enforcement service. This successful bid has only just been announced and it is not yet clear how much each LA will receive from the pot, but it offers an exciting opportunity to increase our existing enforcement capacity here at Bury.

Six Town Housing are also undertaking responsive visits to tenant homes to undertake damp surveys and identify any remedial action required to treat and prevent the condensation and subsequent mould re-appearing.

## **2.6 Capital Investment Programme**

Six Town Housing has been focusing the investment programme on the replacement of windows and doors across the estates and have started recently on the Chesham Estate with the whole scale replacements with double glazed windows and high-performance composite front and rear doors. Properties adjacent to the M66 motorway will also be benefitting from triple glazing to the elevation facing the motorway to assist with noise reduction as well as improving thermal efficiency.

## **2.7 MEES Enforcement**

The Private Sector Housing Team has a dedicated officer who is undertaking targeted proactive work to promote the Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards in the private rented sector. To date the Officer has interrogated information obtained from the Landmark EPC register in conjunction with information provided by Council Tax and Land Registry searches, to identify non-compliant landlords for potential enforcement action. (Properties that have an Energy Performance Certificate rating of F or G are deemed to be non-compliant according to the regulations). The Officer has written to 187 identified properties (and visited where appropriate) to provide advice to residents and inform landlords of their obligations. She has also promoted grants for energy efficient retrofit measures. Of these 187 properties - 74 have now improved:

<b>EPC Rating</b>	<b>Number of Properties Improved</b>
B	1
C	18
D	33
E	22

The average annual energy bill savings per property is £269 and the average investment per property by landlords is £1528.

The Officer is actively engaging with the remaining landlords to improve their properties, alongside identifying other potential non-compliant properties across the Borough for future targeting. The Council has not yet been required to take enforcement action, as Landlords once notified of their obligation, have worked with us to improve their properties. However, should landlords fail to engage then enforcement of the regulations will be undertaken where there is the potential to fine landlords. To decide on the level of fine three factors are considered, the culpability of the offender, the potential for tenant harm and the severity of risk. The maximum penalty cannot exceed £5,000.

The Officer is externally funded by BEIS on a temporary basis until the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023, however there will be a requirement for the Council to find the funds to continue this statutory function in the new financial year onwards.

## **2.8 Statement of Intent**

Greater Manchester's Statement of Intent for ECO4 Flexible Eligibility, for all 10 GM Councils, went online as of 1<sup>st</sup> November and can be viewed on:

[Domestic and non-domestic energy efficiency - Greater Manchester Combined Authority \(greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk\)](https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk)

The procurement of delivery partners has commenced with the application form for GM's approved installer list for ECO4 Flexible Eligibility published on the Chest. The deadline for installer applications is 12 noon 6<sup>th</sup> January 2023. The Chest link is: [ECO4 Flexible Eligibility Deliverer - Approved Installer List \(due-north.com\)](#).

## **2.9 Emerging Local Planning Policy Update**

Bury Council is currently in the process of preparing a new development plan that will comprising the Places for Everyone (a joint development plan for nine Greater Manchester districts) and the Bury Local Plan to replace existing policies set out in the adopted Bury Unitary Development Plan (UDP).

Once adopted, Places for Everyone (PfE) and the Local Plan will both be used as the basis for determining future proposals for the next 20 years or so and both plans will include policies designed to improve energy efficiency.

PfE is currently at a relatively advanced stage having been submitted to the Government and currently being subject to Examination. Subject to the outcome of that Examination, it is anticipated that PfE will be adopted in 2023. Further progress on Bury's Local Plan will also be made in early 2023.

Until such time as replacement policies are in place, existing policies in the adopted Bury Unitary Development Plan will be used to determine planning applications, including Policy EN4 on energy conservation.

Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs) are developed to support and provide further detail on adopted planning policies. It is anticipated that these a suite of SPDs will be prepared to support new PfE and/or Local Plan policies as and when these are adopted.

## **2.10 Chief Executive Letter**

The Chief Executive wrote to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs asking that the Government adopt the recommendations relating to retrofitting homes and buildings in the Blueprint for a Green Recovery report published in January 2021 on the 27<sup>th</sup> of January 2022.

## **3.0 CONCLUSION**

The Council is taking positive action towards targeted advice and assistance, through the installation of retrofit measures via grant funding and the Councils capital investment programme to improve energy standards, reduce energy bills and keep residents warm.

The Council needs to continue to fund the statutory function for the Enforcement of the Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards.

The Council recognises that there will be greater prevalence of damp and mould related issues as a direct result of residents not adequately heating their homes. Therefore, a proactive joint effort between Six Town Housing and the Private Rented Sector Enforcement Team is required to provide advice to residents. To enable this there needs to be greater partnership working as there is limited resource capacity especially within the Private Rented Sector Enforcement Team, therefore there needs to be support provided from other relevant services.

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### List of Background Papers:-

<https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/how-happen-coroner-rules-awaab-25515299>



Cost of living and anti poverty strategy



CoL\_DeliveryPlan\_byQuarter.docx



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[Domestic and non-domestic energy efficiency - Greater Manchester Combined Authority \(greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk\)](http://greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk)

### Contact Details:-

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Executive Director sign off Date: \_\_\_\_\_

JET Meeting Date: \_\_\_\_\_