

## **Energy Consumers Network**

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#### Note of Second Meeting

Online, Tuesday December 5<sup>th</sup> 2023

Chair	Lewis Shand Smith
Advice Direct Scotland	Pamela Stewart
Age Scotland	Adam Stachura
Changeworks	Morven Masterton
Consumer Scotland	Kate Morrison, David Eiser, Parul Tyagi
Energy Saving Trust	Harry Mayers
Fuel Bank Foundation	Matt Cole
SFHA	Eli Harji
Trust Alliance / Energy Ombudsman	Craig Wilson
The Wise Group	Ewan McCall

#### **Secretariat**

Consumer Scotland    Andrew Faulk

#### **Observer**

Scottish Government    Maria Avgerinou

#### **Welcome and Introductions**

1. The Chair welcomed members of the Network to the meeting.
2. Apologies were received from David Hilferty (Citizens Advice Scotland), Frazer Scott (Energy Action Scotland), Dan van der Horst and Adam Cochrane-Williams (Ofgem).

#### **Note of previous meeting**

3. Agreed without changes.

#### **Procedure for sign off of future Network communications**

4. Agreed as proposed, with three working days' notice to be given to members for any external communications unless by exception.

#### **Letter on Energy Affordability to Scottish Government ahead of the budget**

5. A draft letter was circulated.

## Updates from Members

### 6. The Chair noted

- That he had spoken on behalf of the Network at the Energy Action Scotland conference, and that Andrew Faulk had also done so at an SFHA conference on energy and net zero.
- The Green Heat Finance Taskforce, of which the Chair is a member, had also published its first [report](#).
- The next meeting of the Scottish Energy Advisory Board, chaired by the First Minister was scheduled for December 6<sup>th</sup>, the day after the ECN meeting

### 7. Advice Direct Scotland reported:

- More cases of self-disconnection – doubling compared to the same period in 2022
- More cases in relation to complex electricity meters, with clients experiencing difficulties in changing to single rate meters and in relation to disputed bills
- No sign of a lull before Christmas, as had been the case in previous years
- The impression overall is that many people have now reached the end of their reserves and resilience; clients had thought that the energy affordability crisis was a temporary issue, but now seems permanently embedded. Vulnerability is interacting with complexity of issues to make matters worse.

### 8. SFHA:

- has recently published a [report](#) on the positive impacts of the support received by tenants over 2022-23 from the Social Housing Fuel Support Fund, part of the Scottish Government's Fuel Insecurity Fund
- A wider [report](#) on the impacts on tenants of the cost of living crisis has also been published
- Applications from social landlords for phase 3 of the SHFA share of the Fuel Insecurity Fund have been over-subscribed

### 9. The Fuel Bank Foundation reported:

- As with other network members, no evidence of a lull in demand over the summer
- A recent review of had found that 54% of beneficiaries had been recorded in the last year. The organisation has been running for 8 years, showing the increasing concentration of demand
- Again as highlighted by other Network members, clients more often report they have reached the end of savings or other options, and payments are in some circumstances being increased beyond the current £50.
- Specific groups affected tend to be younger consumers and those using PPMs who are unable to spread energy costs across the year. Fuel Bank Foundation staff are increasingly concerned that the current situation will become the new normal.

#### 10. The Energy Ombudsman reported that:

- They are seeing higher levels of complaints across GB, including in Scotland – around 10,000 were recorded between January and August 2023, compared to 7,500 in the whole of 2021
- Around 75% of complaints are upheld, and this proportion has not fallen. Complaints focus on a mix of cost, billing and poor customer service. Smart meter issues are a particular concern, either in relation to suppliers failing to install them as planned, or not functioning properly once in place
- The Ombudsman is considering wider outreach work, following a research finding that 17% of energy consumers in Scotland don't know where to go for help.
- Other Network members noted that some clients had complaints upheld but still experienced a lack of action on the part of energy suppliers. The Ombudsman said that case handlers should be able to assist with this.

#### 11. The Energy Saving Trust reported that:

- Overall enquiry numbers are slightly down, but the proportion of callers demonstrating symptoms of fuel poverty remains much higher than pre crisis, meaning that numbers in the fuel poverty group are remaining constant
- Many callers looking for short term assistance rather than in a position to consider longer term action: EST more rapidly passing these clients on now
- Warmer Homes Scotland contract now in place, running until April 2028; delay in contract means there is a 5 month backlog on which to catch up

#### 12. Changeworks highlighted:

- Variations in demand between individual programmes – more established services have higher demand, some outreach work ongoing for newer services
- Successes in working volunteers to help engage minority ethnic communities for whom English is not their first language

#### 13. Consumer Scotland

- Had recently published the most recent [energy tracker](#); as this is the fifth such report, trend data are now clearer, although these reinforce rather than contrast with experience of other members
- Are working with stakeholder groups to take forward previous discussions on understanding levels of increased costs for disabled people
- Are continuing (as are some other members) to work on Scottish Government-led Ministerial Groups, following recent first stage reports

#### 14. The Wise Group reported:

- Day to day experience similar to others, particularly in relation to clients reaching their limits

- Some success in increasing access to Attendance Allowance (targeted at disabled older people)
- Background research for EAS conference presentation on history of fuel poverty emphasised that today's issues and solutions remain similar to those of the past; impacts of energy efficiency improvements have unfortunately been offset by rising energy prices and stress on incomes
- As with other members, the Wise Group is concerned about the long term risks associated with accepting that the current position is the new normal, rather than seeking long term, integrated solutions.

## 15. Age Scotland

- reflected similar issues to other Network members, and also that older people are reporting:
- food costs as an additional challenge on top of energy bills
- continuing difficulties in contacting energy suppliers
- In line with the Ombudsman comments above, Age Scotland are also recording increased numbers of calls about smart meters – there is a gap between what is promised and what is delivered.

## **Presentations**

### 16. Presentations were given by

- David Eiser, Consumer Scotland, on energy affordability trends and possible policy responses
- Matt Cole, on the headline recommendations of the Fuel Poverty Advisory Panel
- Martin Campbell, Ofgem, on the implementation of new Consumer Standards