

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 1

Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Housing:

Fuel poverty increasing in Reading

The council's website says 7290 households are living in fuel poverty in Reading. This is where a resident is having to choose between heating their house and eating. This is totally unacceptable. With energy prices increasing by up to 50% please can the Lead Councillor confirm what they estimate the number of households in fuel poverty will increase to in Reading later in the year?

The Tory government is clearly failing to get to grips with this crisis. Can the Lead Councillor confirm what the council is doing to tackle fuel poverty including support for residents and insulating homes?

REPLY by Councillor Emberson (Lead Councillor for Housing):

I thank Councillor White for his question. I agree with Councillor White that this Tory government is failing to get to grips with the crisis - the Chancellor's buy now, pay later scheme is of minimal comfort for struggling residents in our town.

The Council also shares the concern about the number of people living in fuel poverty in Reading and agrees that the Government's response to date may be insufficient to prevent even more people facing fuel poverty later this year.

The number of households in fuel poverty cited on the Council's website is taken from official statistics published by Government - the latest figure for Reading Borough is 6,999, equating to 10.3% of households in Reading, which has now been reflected in an update to the Council's website.

The Council is unable to make an accurate estimate of how this number will change in response to energy price rises, but there is grave concern that it will continue to increase. Any increase may be masked by the fact that there is a 'lag' in the national statistical dataset - with the most recent (2021) statistical release being based on 2019 data. The Resolution Foundation, however, estimated in January that, without further intervention, the number of households experiencing 'fuel stress' (which is defined as spending more than 10% of their household budget on energy) could triple from 9% to 27% when the price cap rises on 1 April 2022. They also estimate that, even with the measures announced by the Chancellor earlier this month, this figure will only reduce to 20%.

For its part, the Council recognises that this is an immediate and growing problem. As a Council we deliver a number of programmes to help those facing fuel poverty, most recently via the Household Support Fund (which was previously known as the Covid Local Support Grant and the Covid Winter Grant Scheme). In early 2021 this Fund, using money allocated to Reading by the Department for Work & Pensions, offered an energy voucher scheme which provided 2,310 residents with a £49 voucher. The scheme had a take up of 73% with £104,000 in vouchers distributed. It also enabled £115,000 to be given to Citizens Advice Reading to provide fuel advice, energy efficiency funding and emergency fuel funding.

In December 2021, also from the Household Support Fund, the Council provided an energy voucher to the value of £49 to all individuals that are part of the Council Tax Reduction Scheme. A total of 5,922 residents were eligible for the scheme at the time of launch. If 100% of vouchers are claimed this would total £290,178 in additional support (Councillor White may recall Decision Book 641). The Council has written to all eligible households and also conducted media campaigns to encourage those eligible to apply.

Also in December 2021, we provided £98 worth of energy vouchers to all families part of the Council Tax Reduction Scheme. A total of 1,904 families were eligible for the scheme at the time of launch. If 100% of vouchers are claimed this would represent £190,904 in additional support.

In addition to the Household Support Fund, the Council's Winterwatch service is a fuel poverty programme created to help vulnerable households stay safe and warm through financial hardship. The service offers a bespoke one-to-one session exploring how energy is consumed and discussion on introducing safer, warmer and more cost-effective ways of using energy in an increasingly challenging environment. For those entitled to help, we apply for the £140.00 Warm Homes Discount. This one-off credit is vital for the thousands of low income households living in fuel poor homes. We also explore practical ways of reducing energy bills with simple to follow energy saving tips, guides and calculation to getting the most from their energy. For those who meet the criteria, we look to apply for government grants helping improve the energy efficiency ratings of older, colder dwellings across the Borough with measures such as loft and cavity wall insulation, all of which help reduce energy bills.

As the owner of a substantial proportion of the housing stock in Reading, one of the most important contributions we can make to tackling fuel poverty is to improve the thermal efficiency of our local authority housing stock. Through a long-standing programme of investment, which will continue into the future as set out in the HRA business plan. As reported to Housing, Neighbourhoods and Leisure Committee in July, the majority of Reading Borough Council homes have already achieved an average EPC rating of 'C' (equivalent to the Government's target for all housing by 2030) and a Standard Assessment Procedure (SAP) rating of 74 (out of 100), compared to the national average of 65 for all housing, and 69 for social housing. This helps protect tenants against the impact of rising energy prices and the risk of falling into fuel poverty.

As for private sector housing, the launch of the Council's Rent with Confidence Scheme will help tackle fuel poverty by encouraging landlords to work with the Council to provide good quality accommodation. The criteria for participating landlords requires their properties to meet a minimum EPC rating of 'E' with a commitment to work with the Council to ensure improvements are made to maximise energy efficiency to an EPC rating of C where possible. Participating landlords also commit to comply with Criterion 'C' and 'D' of the Decent Homes standards which set clear expectations about energy efficiency for properties within the scheme.

Finally, through our planning and regulatory roles, the Council is ensuring that new homes (both local authority and private sector housing) are built to energy efficiency standards over and above the statutory minimum in line with our Local Plan 'zero carbon homes' policy, as well as enforcing the Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards regulations to ensure that the private rented sector meets the latest enforceable standards.

I hope that this response reassures Councillor White that Reading Borough Council is doing all that it can to tackle fuel poverty, directly supporting residents across the town in a variety of ways whilst also ensuring the insulation of existing and future homes.