

Fuel Poverty and Energy Efficiency

With the credit crunch and soaring energy bills dominating the news, we're all feeling the pinch. But don't be dismayed there are many ways you can heat your home more effectively and use less energy. On average, homes could save around £300 a year and reduce their carbon dioxide emissions by around 1.5 tonnes by insulating, improving their heating systems and being more energy efficient. There are various schemes in operation at the minute to help you make your house more energy efficient and reduce your fuel bills.

What is fuel poverty?

A fuel poor household is one which cannot afford to keep adequately warm at reasonable cost. In the UK fuel poverty is said to occur when in order to heat its home to an adequate standard of warmth a household needs to spend more than 10% of its income on total fuel use. Fuel poverty is not just about access to heating as the definition of fuel is taken to include all expenditure on domestic energy, including that used for hot water, cooling, lights and appliances.

Causes of fuel poverty

- Low income
- High fuel prices, including the use of relatively expensive fuel sources
- Poor energy efficiency of a home, eg. through low levels of insulation and old or inefficient heating systems
- Under-occupancy: according to UK government statistics, on average those in the most extreme fuel poverty live in larger than average homes

The sharp rise in fuel prices from 2006-8 has led to an estimated doubling of the number of people in fuel poverty

There are a variety of organisations that can help you if you feel you are experiencing fuel poverty. Below are some of the schemes going on at the minute:

Belfast City Council Be Warm Saving Stamp Scheme

At present this scheme is only operational in North Belfast however you should contact your local council to see if they have a similar scheme in place. The Be Warm scheme helps householders save for home heating oil, by spreading the cost over several weeks. You can buy home heating oil stamps, collect them in your savings card and when you order oil use the value of the stamps to pay for all or part of it. For more information on this contact Belfast City Council on 028 9032 0202 or contact your local council to see if they have a similar scheme.

Warm Homes Scheme- launched 29th July 2009

The new Warm Homes Scheme in Northern Ireland was launched to help tackle fuel poverty. The scheme has been refocused and will target people on low incomes who need help to improve the energy efficiency of their home. If you need help paying for heating and insulation improvements in your privately owned or rented home, you, your partner or civil partner may be able to get help from the government's Warm Homes Scheme.

The Warm Homes Grants provide a package of energy efficiency and heating measures, up to the value of £850 and energy efficiency advice, tailored to each household. The grant offers a number of home improvement measures, such as:

- Loft insulation
- Draught Proofing
- Cavity Wall Insulation
- Reflective Radiator Panels (solid walls only)
- Water Tank Insulation
- Compact Fluorescent Lamps

Who is eligible?

The Warm Homes Scheme has two elements: Warm Homes and Warm Homes Plus. All applicants will be considered for Warm Homes in the first instance. The applicant must be the owner occupier of a dwelling or in the case of private rented sector the applicant must be named on the Tenancy Agreement.

Entry into Warm Homes will require applicants to be in receipt of a qualifying benefit. To find out if you qualify or for more information free phone 0800 988 0559

Energy Efficiency

The Energy Saving Trust advice centre offers free, comprehensive advice and support on how you can save energy in the home, low carbon transport and renewable technologies, as well as tips on saving water and waste, helping you to save money and the environment. They currently operate across Northern Ireland with offices in Belfast, Enniskillen and Derry/Londonderry to contact the Energy Saving Trust call 0800 512 012.

Hot tips for heating your home

- Close your curtains at dusk to reduce the amount of heat escaping through your windows
- If you have a programmer or timer, set it so that your heating and hot water only come on when needed. If you are out of the house all day then your heating shouldn't need to be switched on. By setting the heating system to come on for as short a time as possible you will save money
- 'Bleed' radiators from time to time to remove unwanted air from your heating system and keep your radiators working at their maximum output
- If you tank has an old, thin insulation jacket, fit a BS Kitemarked insulating jacket, 75mm or 3 inches thick around your hot water tank. It can save you around £35 a year and it will only cost around £12 to buy.

Tips of how to save energy and lower your bill

- Don't hang your wet clothes over the radiators as this will cool them and prevent heat from circulating through the house. Try hanging your washing in a closed room, with the radiators turned off and the window slightly open.
- Try doing your washing at lower temperatures – most of the energy used by your washing machine goes into heating the water. A warm wash uses far less energy than a hot one and if you also start using your half load or economy wash settings for smaller loads you could see your electricity bill falling!
- If you regularly defrost your fridge/freezer they will be less iced up and won't have to work as hard to maintain a low temperature. Try not to put warm or hot foods directly into the fridge – allow them to cool rather than force the appliance to work harder and use more energy.
- Don't leave appliances on standby – that light on your gadgets means a lot of energy is still being used. Taking the time to switch off your appliances completely could save you money!

If you would like help with any other family issue, Please ring **Parents Advice Centre** for guidance and support on **Freephone 0808 8010 722** or email parents@pachelp.org