

WIRRAL COUNCIL

CABINET

22 SEPTEMBER 2011

SUBJECT:	<i>DRAFT WIRRAL AFFORDABLE WARMTH IMPLEMENTATION PLAN 2012-2014</i>
WARD/S AFFECTED:	<i>ALL</i>
REPORT OF:	<i>INTERIM DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE SERVICES</i>
RESPONSIBLE PORTFOLIO HOLDER:	<i>COUNCILLOR GEORGE DAVIES</i>
KEY DECISION?	YES

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to seek Member's views on the draft Wirral Affordable Warmth Implementation Plan 2012-14 (Appendix 1) prior to Borough-wide consultation. This will be key to delivering the Corporate Priority of "Working with our partners and the private sector to improve energy and resource efficiency to address and tackle fuel poverty" and meeting strategic priorities identified within the Housing Strategy for Wirral.
- 1.2 The plan will also assist the Council in meeting its statutory duty to report on reductions in carbon dioxide emissions from housing under the Home Energy Conservation Act 1995.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION/S

- 2.1 That Member's approve the draft Wirral Affordable Warmth Implementation Plan 2012-14 for consultation.

3.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 3.1 Member's approval is sought in order to move to a wider public and partner consultation.

4.0 BACKGROUND AND KEY ISSUES

4.1 Background

- 4.1.1 Wirral Council has worked with partners to deliver specific actions to address fuel poverty since 2001 when the first Merseyside Affordable Warmth Strategy was launched. In 2004 Wirral produced its own Strategy, which was subsequently reviewed, updated and re-launched in 2008.

- 4.1.2 Following Cabinet approval of the new Housing Strategy 2011-2026 and Strategic Housing Plan on 23rd June 2011 (Minute No. 45 refers), there is a

need for the Council to develop a new plan outlining how it will achieve the actions and targets contained within Theme 5, making homes warmer, of the Strategic Housing Plan. The starting point for this has been to review the 2008 Wirral Affordable Warmth Strategy, assess its outcomes, identify weaknesses and then work with partners to produce a draft Affordable Warmth Implementation Plan.

4.2 Achievements

4.2.1 Since 2008, the work of the Council and its partners has seen some major achievements with regards to increasing affordable warmth, especially in improvements to the energy efficiency of homes. Amongst the successes of the 2008 Strategy are:

- Extending the Council's Cosy Homes Insulation and Heating Programmes Borough-wide, bringing in £1.7m of funding from British Gas in the last six months of 2010-11 and leading to just under 8,000 insulation measures installed;
- Providing face-to-face, door-to-door advice on affordable warmth through the Warmer Wirral initiative to just under 3,500 households on welfare and disability benefits;
- The establishment of referrals from the Warmer Wirral Team to agencies providing benefit entitlement checks to increase households income and assistance with changing energy suppliers to gain better energy prices
- An increase in the number of strategies and policies that included fuel poverty as a priority area for action;
- An increase in the average annual referral rate into npower's Health Through Warmth scheme for emergency heating assistance, from 227 per year to 252 per year;
- A five-fold increase in telephone and face-to-face contacts by Wirral households with the Energy Saving Trust Advice Centre (10,376 contacts in 2010-11);
- The delivery of the Wirral Healthy Homes pilot in New Brighton, leading to 376 referrals to partner organisations;
- A pilot project, funded by NHS Wirral and npower and delivered by Energy Projects Plus, to trial a new approach in reaching COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease) patients through GP surgeries in order to provide energy efficiency measures;
- An increase in funding for Cosy Loans, allowing five times as many homes to benefit from interest-free loans in 2010-11 (49 loans issued) as were assisted in 2007/08 (10 loans issued); and
- Providing solar water heating systems to areas of Birkenhead undergoing Group Repair through Housing Market Renewal Initiative funding.

4.3 Energy Prices and Fuel Poverty Levels

4.3.1 The activity regarding Affordable Warmth in Wirral is occurring at a time of increasing energy prices. Between 2004 and 2009, domestic electricity prices increased by 75% and gas prices by 122%. Household energy bills have increased by £472 in the last five years and in addition to this, price rises announced in summer 2011 will be adding an average of £177 on to annual dual fuel bills.

- 4.3.2 The resultant effect of these energy price rises has been an increase in fuel poverty. A household in fuel poverty is officially defined by the Government as one “which needs to spend more than 10% of its household income to achieve a satisfactory heating regime”. In England in 2009, there were 4 million households living in fuel poverty, up from 3.3 million in 2008. There is a time lag of about two years for national fuel poverty statistics therefore 2009 is the most recent year for when statistics have been released.
- 4.3.3 The Government has commissioned Professor John Hills to carry out an independent review of the fuel poverty target and definition. Under the current UK fuel poverty strategy, the main target is to eradicate fuel poverty by 2016 but this is now considered to be more difficult to achieve within this timescale.
- 4.3.4 More localised fuel poverty statistics for 2008 were released in February 2011, which show fuel poverty in Wirral is estimated to affect 17.1% of all households, this is higher than the 2008 England average of 15.6%. These estimates show the worst area for fuel poverty (Ilchester Road area in Birkenhead) has a much higher rate than the borough average, at 30.6%. 12 Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) contain at least one in four fuel poor households. With statistics also identifying that no LSOA in Wirral is free of fuel poverty. The area showing the lowest rate but still having 1 in 13 households in fuel poverty is the Bromsgrove area in Greasby.

4.4 Implementation Plan Development

- 4.4.1 Wirral’s new Affordable Warmth Implementation Plan will mirror the same timeframe as the Housing Strategy’s three-year Strategic Housing Plan so will run until 2013/14. It is intended that the Affordable Warmth Implementation Plan will be reviewed every six-months by the Affordable Warmth Steering Group to ensure it remains relevant and reflective of new opportunities.
- 4.4.2 A toolkit produced by the fuel poverty charity NEA (National Energy Action) has allowed the Council to review its current fuel poverty-related activity against recommended basic, desirable and best practice activities. Weaknesses were identified with a view to moving all activity to best practice.
- 4.4.3 A first draft action plan was drawn up by identifying tasks which would address the weaknesses along with tasks which would sustain or improve current activity. This was reviewed by the Affordable Warmth Steering Group and changes recommended with the amended draft presented to Wirral’s Fuel Poverty Forum for wider engagement. Refinements were subsequently made as well as new activity included with a further draft developed by the Steering Group included as Appendix A of this report.
- 4.4.4 The activities within the Plan have been grouped together under five key themes which are fully explained within the Plan itself. The themes address all the main causes of fuel poverty (energy efficiency of homes, income levels and energy costs) as well as addressing referral networks and raising the profile of fuel poverty in the Borough. The plan focuses activity on those households susceptible to health conditions made worse by cold and damp housing, thereby assisting with health inequalities and reducing excess winter deaths.

5.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 5.1 Fuel poverty contributes to social and health inequalities but is avoidable through targeted intervention. The risks of inaction to reduce fuel poverty are numerous but include more households in fuel debt and general debt, increased health hazards from cold temperatures in homes and will be a contributory factor in excess winter deaths. Inaction could also result in higher numbers of GP visits and hospital admissions (there is a strong relationship between cold temperatures and cardio-vascular and respiratory diseases) and poor childhood health (children living in cold homes are more than twice as likely to suffer from a variety of respiratory problems than children living in warm homes).

6.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 6.1 There were no other options considered.

7.0 CONSULTATION

- 7.1 Consultation has so far been undertaken with the Wirral Affordable Warmth Steering Group and the Wirral Fuel Poverty Forum, which both have a good cross-section of Council and non-Council representatives.
- 7.2 Following Cabinet's approval of this draft of the Plan, wider consultation will take place over a six week period by means of a consultation questionnaire which will be sent with the Plan to all Councillors, members of the Strategic Housing Partnership, colleagues in Public Health, members of VCAW and to Council officers whose work impacts upon fuel poverty or whose roles could assist to identify and refer fuel poor households. The draft Plan and questionnaire will also be publicised through a media release and will be available on the Council's website.

8.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR VOLUNTARY, COMMUNITY AND FAITH GROUPS

- 8.1 The Affordable Warmth Implementation Plan consultation process will be developed to be inclusive of a wide range of stakeholders, voluntary, community and faith organisations and members of the general public.

9.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: FINANCIAL; IT; STAFFING; AND ASSETS

- 9.1 The various activities within the plan are either funded from budgets previously allocated or will require assessment of financial need as part of the development process of that particular activity and would be subject to separate Cabinet reports. The current budgets allocated to affordable warmth initiatives in 2011-12 are as follows:

Cosy Homes Insulation Programme - £2.098 million

Cosy Homes Heating Grants - £0.25 million

- 9.2 All activities are carried out using existing staffing resources. There are no IT requirements or implications for Council assets.

10.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

10.1 There are no legal implications arising from this report.

11.0 EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

11.1 As previously referred to in paragraph 5.1, fuel poverty can contribute to social and health inequalities. The implementation of the Plan will assist in addressing these.

11.2 Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

- (a) Is an EIA required? Yes
- (b) If 'yes', has one been completed? No (this is currently being completed)

12.0 CARBON REDUCTION IMPLICATIONS

12.1 The Implementation Plan includes activities to improve the energy efficiency of homes. However fuel poverty reduction activity doesn't automatically lead to reductions in carbon dioxide emissions as fuel poor households often under-consume energy.

13.0 PLANNING AND COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

13.1 There are no planning and community safety implications arising from this report, however an activity detailed within the Plan includes exploring the setting of local planning and refurbishment standards to improve the energy efficiency of homes.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – Draft Affordable Warmth Implementation Plan

REFERENCE MATERIAL

None.

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
Cabinet – report entitled “Wirral Affordable Warmth Strategy 2008 – 2010”	16 th October, 2008