**Supporting vulnerable energy customers through the energy crisis**

This short paper has been developed by fuel poverty charity National Energy Action (NEA). It highlights what positive steps can be taken by a range of different organisations to support vulnerable people through the energy crisis. It is hoped that these suggested actions will be complemented by further additional support by the UK Government this autumn and winter.

**Ofgem**

There are some clear actions that Ofgem can take which are in line with their statutory remit and can ease the pressures on struggling households:

1. Work with energy suppliers to develop a package of additional support for vulnerable energy consumers in advance of this winter. This would build on the support package that was developed for the pandemic and significantly enhance its ambition given the scale of the energy related challenges that will be experienced this winter.
2. Reduce standing charges for prepayment users; a key focus should be to recover SOLR electricity costs on a volumetric basis.
3. Work with energy supplier to better identify and act on financial vulnerability of energy consumers.
4. Proactively enforce all vulnerability related licence obligations.
5. Investigate the re-introduction of the previous Safeguard Tariff and how deeper price protection might be possible via a new mandatory Social Tariff to help make energy more affordable for low-income energy customers.

**Energy suppliers**

While the UK Government have the primary responsibility for funding additional support this winter, energy suppliers are of central importance to tackling the impact of the energy crisis for their most vulnerable energy customers. The following actions are in line with existing licence obligations and would help ease the pressures on struggling households:

1. Ensure call centres are adequately resourced and call centre staff are suitably skilled to engage with vulnerable energy customers
2. Enhance visibility and accessibility of current assistance provided by the UK Government, obligated schemes and/or any current or voluntary agreement with Ofgem or via Energy UK’s vulnerability commitment.
3. Improve identification of financial vulnerability, review self-disconnection identification process and ensure that vulnerable customers are aware of any additional support
4. Ensure that ability to pay processes are fully embed across all relevant teams and promote a range of debt repayment options and taking more active steps to identify and reduce problem debt for customers. This includes being proactive in revieing existing debt repayment plans for customers who are falling further into debt or taking early action to contact customers who have fallen into arrears for the first time and notifying them of any additional support that is available.
5. Ensure that customers’ debts to a failed supplier are transferred to the SOLR so that this debt is regulated through the standard gas and electricity supplier licence conditions.
6. Prioritise the rollout of smart meters for legacy PPM customers and ensure that any vulnerabilities are identified prior to switching any smart meter customers accounts from credit to pre-pay.
7. Develop an effective ‘alternative help’ signposting pathway for vulnerable customers who were previously able to access the Warm Home Discount Broader Group but are no longer eligible due to the UK Government’s new higher energy cost targeting.
8. Review current CSR partnerships and programmes to give households in or at risk of fuel poverty priority access to any related support programmes.

**Energy networks**

Energy networks (both GDNs and DNOs) can access significant funding to support vulnerable customers within the RIIO framework and have wider opportunities to identify and act on vulnerability and support those in or at risk of fuel poverty.

1. Enhance visibility and accessibility of current assistance provided by RIIO funded schemes
2. Develop or update advice resources for those in or at risk of fuel poverty to signpost wider support that is available to manage energy bills.
3. Train and resource frontline staff to identify financial vulnerability and fuel poverty risk factors when carrying out their operational duties within domestic premises.
4. Work with energy suppliers to consistently identify financial vulnerability through the Priority Service Register (PSR).
5. Review priorities within business plans and investigate bringing forward any relevant initiatives that can have a positive impact on those in or at risk of fuel poverty.
6. Review current CSR partnerships and programmes to give households in or at risk of fuel poverty priority access to any related support programmes.

**Local government**

Local authorities have increasingly been relied upon to provide relief for low-income households from the energy crisis via the administration of Council Tax rebates and crisis funds. While NEA recognise that each local authority will have its own local priorities and capacity constraints, the following actions would help to better support low-income households during the energy crisis:

1. Enhance awareness and accessibility of related crisis support funds
2. Provide information and advice on the wider support those most at risk of fuel poverty can access via energy suppliers and other key agencies
3. Use central government energy scheme grants to help those most at risk and improve the energy efficiency of Council housing stock
4. Enforce existing regulations on energy efficiency and property standards in the private rented sector

**Housing providers and private landlords**

1. Enhance tenant’s knowledge of where they can access support (nationally or locally) to help manage their energy bills
2. Train and resource social housing provider tenant liaison staff to identify financial vulnerability and fuel poverty risk factors.
3. Improve the thermal efficiency and property standards up to statutory requirements in the private rented sector

**The role of health practitioners**

1. Identify patients at most risk of a cold home
2. Undertake e-module on addressing the health risks associated with cold homes’
3. Identify what local support is available to make improvements in homes (for example, heating repair services and building insulation providers) and help the person to access them.
4. Ensure people who are vulnerable to health problems from living in a cold home have a plan for how to tackle the problem before they return home from a health setting.
5. Support the wider implementation of NICE Guidance on helping to prevent winter deaths and illnesses associated with cold homes.