

Energy we can all afford?



**warmer
homes**



**lower
bills**



**cooler
planet**

Action Pack – January 2013

This winter a coalition of national organisations is organising a programme of over 40 major public meetings across the UK with local MPs and other national speakers. We are doing this as the Energy Bill goes through Parliament. We are looking to work with local organisations to help us make this happen and generate interest and action on energy issues.

This pack has background and advice on how to organise a successful meeting. It covers:

- What are we doing and why?
- Who's involved?
- Why organise public meetings?
- Working with organisations active on fuel poverty
- What help is available
- Meeting structure and title
- Other ways to organise events
- After your meeting
- The Energy Bill timeline

More information is available on our website: www.energywecanallafford.org

Here you can find a list of meetings and downloadable resources.

There is also a discussion forum – we invite anyone organising a meeting to link to this. It will offer updates in progress and support and a chance to share questions and ideas:

<http://forum.foe.co.uk/campaignhubs/index.php/board,61.0.html>

1. What are we doing and why?

We are seeking to run meetings across the UK on a common theme and in a similar style. The theme links our major concerns. Energy prices have risen rapidly, chiefly because of our increasing dependence on gas, and millions are trapped in fuel poverty: we need a new and positive approach to this based on energy efficiency and clean sustainable energy.

We're doing this with three aims. One is to influence the Energy Bill that is now going through Parliament. The second is to call on the Government to use the money it gets from our carbon taxes to make our homes super-energy efficient –this is the only permanent solution to drive down energy bills and end fuel poverty. The third aim is to boost local interest and engagement with these issues.

This will be a powerful way to link work on energy and cutting carbon with issues around fuel poverty. We want to hear the views of MPs on the UK's energy future and for them to answer people's questions. We suggest that these meetings are run in a 'Question Time' format with short presentations by each speaker followed by a carefully chaired session with questions from the audience.

Rising fuel bills are an enormous concern to many households – especially with winter approaching and many people still hard up as the economy struggles to recover from the recession. There are voices out there arguing – quite wrongly – that “going green” is responsible for the rises. Of course, analysis shows that it is rising fossil fuel prices that are responsible for the bulk of the rises, but the voices of the gas and coal lobby are being heard in Parliament.

We are confident we have the most sensible solution to this. It means radical moves to get houses using less energy, and a big push to make sure the energy they do use is green. Not only is this better for the environment but it gets us off the fossil fuel hook at a time when no one seriously thinks the price of oil and gas are going to come down in the long term.

2. Who's involved?

The meetings are being organised by a coalition that includes Friends of the Earth, the Energy Bill Revolution (EBR) coalition, Stop Climate Chaos, the Low Carbon Communities Network and Greenpeace UK. These organisations link around 200 national organisations and hundreds of community groups and networks.

- Energy Bill Revolution (EBR) is an alliance of 120 children's charities, environment groups, health & disability groups, unions and businesses working to drive down bills, end fuel poverty, reduce emissions and boost jobs and growth through using carbon tax revenue to make homes super energy efficient. EBR is focusing on investment in tackling fuel poverty and links around 120 organisations from commercial companies ASDA, the Co-op and Confused.com to voluntary sector bodies including the Children's Society, MENCAP, and the National Pensioners Convention. www.energybillrevolution.org
- Stop Climate Chaos is a network of 100+ environment and development charities, trade unions, faith groups, community and women's groups. www.stopclimatechaos.org
- Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace are long-established environmental organisations with local groups across the UK www.foe.co.uk; www.greenpeace.org.uk
- The Low Carbon Communities Network links about 400 community organisations active on saving energy and low-carbon living. www.lowcarboncommunities.net

3. Why organise public meetings?

We need to put our message to MPs. Many organisations have been doing this already, with letters and local events. But experience shows none of these engage an MP with the arguments as much as a public meeting does.

Public meetings are a particularly effective way to put arguments to an MP because:

a) MPs have to engage with the arguments themselves at a public meeting – they cannot send a standard reply, or offer to simply ‘pass concerns on to the Minister’. When MPs have to make a public speech, they will think about the issues much more. If they fudge the answers, they can be challenged and questioned immediately.

b) If an MP is in front of an audience listening to presentations by those affected by cold homes, or those who have created jobs in the area providing the solutions, they will listen and remember the story far more than if the same points are put in a letter. MPs are busy and rarely get time to sit down and read such things carefully – this is a great way of getting them to listen.

c) If the MP sees good attendance at a meeting, it shows the level and depth of public support far more than emails/postcards. If the arguments s/he puts forward are unconvincing s/he will see it immediately in the faces of the audience, or hear the applause for a counter point of view put by someone else. It is an instant feedback they don’t get from letters or media interviews.

d) Holding a meeting can be a real stimulus for action in areas where meetings are held. Effective publicity may bring in new support and good media coverage. This is particularly the case with these meetings as the Energy Bill Revolution coalition offers the chance to link with very wide ranging groups.

4. Influencing the Energy Bill

The Bill was introduced into Parliament in November. It has had its’ First and Second Readings Reading in the House of Commons and will now go through the ‘Committee Stage’ and ‘Report Stage’. The Committee Stage, expected in early March, is an important point for introducing amendments, and this is the point at which well-informed MPs who are encouraged by public concern can seek to improve the proposals (and fight any weakening of the Bill).

The Bill certainly does need to be stronger. A briefing on the Bill from 5 national NGOs is downloadable at: http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/briefings/energy_bill_2nd_reading.pdf

Among other issues, they stress that the Energy Bill must be strengthened so that it:

1. Includes a decarbonisation target as recommended by the Committee on Climate Change.
2. Supports energy efficiency
3. Tackles the dirtiest power stations with more rigorous emissions limits for new plant
4. Uses energy saving, storage and system flexibility to match demand with supply not just new power plants.
5. Ensures that only low-carbon biomass electricity is supported, at a scale that is within sustainable limits

5. Working with organisations active on fuel poverty

There are many groups working on this issue and it will be important to try and involve some of these. Meetings will be more effective if they include those who are suffering the effects of fuel poverty. Many key ones are members of the EBR coalition: these include Barnardos, Disability Rights, Child Poverty Action Group, National Children's Bureau (who have trained up young 'champions' on these issues), Disability Rights, The Girl Guides, MENCAP and the National Pensioners Convention. EBR are looking to get letters of support from some of these for local organisers to use.

It may also be useful to contact your local Council for Voluntary Service and/or, if you are in a rural area, your Rural Community Council. Many of these will have on-line directories of local organisations that may be interested, and their directors may also have advice on who to contact. Some may be actively interested in promoting your meeting and may have substantial outreach. There are also Citizens' Advice Bureaux in many places – check www.citizensadvice.org.uk for your nearest bureau. These have been working very actively with National Energy Action on fuel poverty and energy saving issues and may be keen to offer in their knowledge and experience of the local situation.

Some organisations may be surprised to be contacted by environmental groups (others have good links): it may be worth finding out the contact details for the director or key staff and sending an email to be followed by a phone call. We have a template letter that you can use.

6. Meeting structure and title

The structure of the meeting can be tailored to each area, depending on your group, the local MPs, key local issues, high profile speakers etc. The meeting is likely to get better attendance from people who are not just seen as the usual local green types if it is billed to appeal to the widest range of people concerned about fuel bills. That is why we are highlighting the cost issue with the title "Energy we can all afford".

The panel should aim to include a local MP (or perhaps MPs) because it is putting the case to them that is the real aim of the meeting. The choice of other speakers and chair ought to help ensure that the MP hears strong arguments that:

- We must boost the amount of energy we generate from low-carbon, domestic sources to wean ourselves off rising fossil fuel prices;
- We must reduce the amount of energy we need in our homes: recycling the carbon taxes we are paying into making homes far more efficient could do this fairly;
- Highlight how serious the impacts of the current situation are – by telling stories of those affected by high bills / cold homes, especially by the most vulnerable (elderly people, children, disabled).
- Highlight the benefits of taking actions both to help affected people, but also in terms of job creation and new industries.

Local validation of the campaign is also important – by highlighting locally affected people, or local companies, or just through a key local figure supporting the campaign. A well-known local chair can help draw a crowd – several meetings so far are booking local radio or newspaper editors / journalists.

The panel and chair will be able to ensure the MPs present are kept under pressure on the key asks of the meeting. It will be their job to set up the big questions for the MP in advance of them speaking, to pick up on them not answering them, or avoiding the question - and to use any opportunity offered in Q&A session after the presentations to turn the focus back to whether or not the MP will be voting/supporting/signing up to the key demands.

If time allows it may be useful to have a tea break between the presentations and the Q&A session. This gives time for people to look at exhibitions / displays stall etc. (you may find organisations keen to have such a presence). In addition, if people are asked to feed in their questions in writing, then the chair / organisers can use this interval to group these and identify the most popular and significant.

7. Other formats for a meeting

Holding a public meeting with a 'Question Time' format is not the only option for a EWCAA meeting. Depending local circumstances, the capacity of your group, and current (if any) relationship with the constituency MP, it may be appropriate to consider other formats. These could include:

- A larger meeting with two or more MPs speaking
- A photo-exhibition, displays and discussion with the MP,
- A 'coffee morning' style of hearing from local residents
- A 'show and tell' tour around a local green business plus discussion, or
- An informal 'drop-in' lobbying meeting with the MP in a suitable public place

8. After the meeting

Holding the meeting is a significant achievement but it doesn't end there. The Energy Bill will be making its progress through Parliament during 2013. Meantime household and business energy bills will continue to rise and other local opportunities will present themselves for ongoing publicity and 'next steps' action.

New partnerships and opportunities for joint action may also become evident during the Energy We Can All Afford meeting and planning process e.g. linking environmental groups with local advocacy organisations e.g. Age UK or Citizen's Advice. Continuing some kind of link with local agencies makes sense. And of course with the Energy Bill in Parliament, keeping your local MP informed is important .

So maximise your impact:

- Have a contacts sheet at your meeting that people can sign for further information is helpful (but not all participants will sign this).
- Send us a summary of the key questions discussed at your meeting and especially any good quotes from your MP.
- Letting local media know what was discussed all helps, as does use of social media.
- Share what worked via the EWCAA discussion forum (and maybe what didn't!)

10. Ways that we can help

We are keen to help any local organisation organise a meeting and to help you make these more than 'just another public meeting'. Stop Climate Chaos produced a detailed guide to running good public meetings in 2011 – you can get a copy from the website.

We can offer:

- help in contacting MPs and other speakers,
- direct access to national speakers from EBR, FoE and other organisations
- guidance and support in planning meetings and events
- leaflets and posters ready for you to add your details (we can help with printing if need be)
- slides and audio-visuals for backdrops (and a short presentation)
- Guidance on how to identify other local organisations that support EBR and are interested in these events (e.g. National Childrens Bureau, Disability Rights) and on how to contact them

Small grants are available in some cases to help cover the costs of hall hire.

And this is what we'd like your group to do:

- Write to your local MP to obtain commitment to taking part in a public meeting and securing a date and time
- Let us know when a decision has been made (Early expressions of interest also help build the national initiative)
- Arrange local speakers and contributors – as appropriate – including a good chairperson.
- Find a suitable venue – see our guide for more information. It may be possible to find a local sponsor or donation of a space
- Publicise widely using your own networks and others locally.
- Brief the speakers and chair-person early on and re-check with them a couple of days before the meeting
- Keep in touch with us – we're here to help
- Hold the meeting!
- After the meeting, let us know how it went.