

Councillor Deirdre Mackay

Column

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Like many people I have always liked my warmth, there is nothing more miserable than being cold, and over the past weeks with a real nip in the air our house shifted from summer into winter mode and the heating went back on.

Last winter we suffered extremes of cold however even an average winter in Sutherland exposes us to many months of damp and cold when we need to be warm and cosy in our homes.

Last winter I was particularly saddened by the plight of constituents who contacted me because they could not afford to keep their houses sufficiently warm.

The term commonly applied to this is fuel poverty.

Personally I prefer to talk about 'affordable warmth', but, either way, it is an issue which now affects people on middle as well as low incomes.

The cost of heating our homes has become a real issue.

A household is said to be in fuel poverty when it cannot afford to keep adequately warm at reasonable cost, that is it needs to spend more than 10% of its income on heating.

Contributing factors are high fuel prices and poor energy efficiency of a home, e.g. through low levels of insulation and old or inefficient heating systems.

The rise in energy bills has been driven by Britain's increased dependence on imported fuel and increases in wholesale costs.

Over the last ten years, the average fuel bill has more than doubled.

The six main energy retailers recently announced average price increases of 15 per cent for the coming winter.

But a Deutsche Bank report into the future of energy bills found that a further price increase of 25 per cent can be expected by 2015.

On top of this, in an effort to secure our longer term energy supply, cut carbon and boost energy efficiency, the government has committed to spending £200bn on new infrastructure by 2020.

Unfortunately we householders can expect to foot the bill.

Last month Mr Huhne urged customers to help themselves by comparing different supplier tariffs and switching to a better deal.

Why do so few customers do this when there are supposedly real savings to be made?

I suspect the deterrent is the fact that energy bills and tariffs are so notoriously confusing and complicated and that the big 6 utility companies raise their prices at the same time which further confuses matters.

In short the government needs to seriously think again about what strategy can keep the lights on, but at a price affordable to middle as well as low income households.

Improved energy efficiency in our homes is one of the most effective ways to reduce bills and as it is a devolved issue the Scottish Government, Highland Council and the energy companies must work together to make sure all houses are properly insulated and that householders know how to use their heating systems in the most efficient way.

Sutherland has high levels of fuel poverty.

Over the past year however private householders in East Sutherland and Edderton have benefited from free cavity and loft insulation through the Universal Home Insulation Scheme.

Scottish Government has recently awarded Highland Council additional funding to extend this scheme to households in N/NW Sutherland and other areas in Highland.

This scheme offers free surveys and free insulation to private householders identified as requiring loft and cavity wall insulation.

People are also offered a free home energy audit and free impartial advice to help reduce fuel bills.

A well insulated home uses less energy and can be comfortably and affordably heated so I would actively encourage people to take the

opportunity to apply for the free measures currently available under the UHIS.

Additional advice and support is also available from the Energy Saving Scotland Advice Centre, Freephone 0800 512 012 or visit www.energysavingtrust.co.uk