



CRC 14/08

Friday 28 November 2008

Rural watchdog visits Ribble Valley to check-out initiatives to combat fuel poverty

Today (Friday, November 28, 2008) the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) is visiting the Ribble Valley in Lancashire to see work underway to tackle fuel poverty in rural communities. High fuel prices are hitting rural areas hardest, particularly in lower-income households. The 42 per cent of rural homes not connected to mains gas have to rely on more expensive fuels and are not eligible for 'dual fuel' discounts. In addition, a third of rural homes have solid walls which are much more costly to insulate. The visit coincides with the final week of the annual Warm Homes campaign, organised by National Energy Action, to highlight the plight of the 5.4 million households in the UK who cannot afford to heat their homes.

Speaking ahead of the visit CRC Commissioner Richard Burge said: "I am looking forward to visiting the Ribble Valley to see the progress that is being made to tackle rural fuel poverty. People in rural areas face many of the same causes of fuel poverty as their urban counterparts but there are also some additional challenges, especially the high cost of alternative fuels such as oil or bottled gas. We welcome Government's calls for suppliers to reflect lower commodity costs in consumers' bills but more needs to be done to help vulnerable rural households afford to pay their fuel bills. The population of rural areas is ageing rapidly and older people rely much more on benefits to supplement their income. As many as 250,000 rural residents are not claiming pension credit, a key eligibility criterion for Warm Front energy efficiency grants, however. In fact although a quarter of all those in fuel poverty live in rural areas, just 10 per cent of Warm Front grants go there. Today's visit is part of the CRC's work to highlight and help improve the situation for rural communities."

Ribble Valley Borough Council Leader Michael Ranson said: "A large number of Ribble Valley properties are unsuitable for energy saving measures, such as cavity wall insulation, while Warm Front grants do not meet the full cost of installing oil-fired central heating. The council is doing all it can to alleviate rural fuel poverty, such as setting up village oil-purchasing schemes and providing top-up grants for Warm Front, and we welcome the contribution of the Commission for Rural Communities to this important matter."

Clive Rushmore, a Partnership Development Officer with eaga, the company that manages the Warm Front scheme on behalf of the Government, said: "The most sustainable and long-term solution for eradicating fuel poverty is to help households become more energy efficient. Offering grants for insulation and modern heating is hugely important – but many rural homes have solid walls and are off the mains gas network. It is vital therefore that we explore other options such as solid wall insulation or renewable technologies like solar heating or air source heat pumps. At eaga we have worked with a number of local authorities and housing associations across the UK to offer these solutions. We are also currently trialing a solar hot water heating pilot across England to understand the impact this has on rural fuel poverty. If, as is hoped, the results are positive this scheme could be extended which could be good news for households in the Ribble Valley."

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For further information contact Chris Wynne-Davies on 01242 534070

Notes for editors:

1 The outline itinerary for the visit is as follows: 09:15 household in Slaidburn that has recently received free loft insulation; 10:30 household in Newton-in-Bowland in need of insulation upgrades; 11.30 Slaidburn Village Hall to meet people involved in a proposed collective oil purchasing scheme.

2 A working dinner is taking place on the evening before the visit involving representatives from: National Energy Action, eaga, Lancashire Energy Action Partnership, Lancashire County Council, Ribble Valley Borough Council and the Commission for Rural Communities.

3 Fuel poverty is when a household needs to spend more than 10 per cent of income on domestic energy use including lighting and heating their home to an adequate level of warmth.

4 Warm Front is the Government-funded initiative to help make homes warmer, healthier and more energy-efficient. Fitted correctly, solar thermal panels can provide up to 60% of a typical household's hot water needs – providing a cost effective and environmentally preferable alternative to fuels such as oil.

5 The CRC was established in April 2005 and became an independent body on 1 October 2006, following the enactment of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act, 2006. The role of the CRC is to provide well-informed, independent advice to Government and ensure that policies reflect the real needs and circumstances of people living and working in rural England. We give particular focus to tackling disadvantage and economic under-performance.

We have three key functions:

- advocate: the voice for rural people, business and communities;
- expert adviser: providing evidence-based, objective advice to Government and others; and
- independent watchdog: monitoring and reporting on the delivery of policies nationally, regionally and locally.

Further information about the CRC and its work can be found at:

www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk