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TEST OF CHANGE WITH ALIENERGY

Support through the transition to sustainable energy

**The role of advice-giving
for rural social tenants**

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Rural Scotland is energy-rich, and hosts much of our energy infrastructure, yet one in four rural households lives in extreme fuel poverty.¹ Scottish Government invests heavily in retrofitting homes providing air-source heat pumps and roof top solar to help change this. But, these measures don't always produce bill savings for rural households. In fact, without the right support, household costs can rise. This report shows the vital importance of local energy advice in changing this.

What did we do?

Following a participatory decision-making process, Taking Action on Rural Poverty worked with sustainable energy charity **ALlenergy**, to understand the value of bespoke advice-giving for social tenants navigating the transition to sustainable energy, through retrofitted green technology, such as heat pumps and solar panels.

- Tenant experiences were developed into case studies, representing the reality for rural social tenants navigating retrofit challenges.
- We produced guides for social tenants and landlords, supported by Citizens' Panels, and focused on identified challenges.
- Using focus groups and survey methods we evaluated the practical and wellbeing impact advice-giving has for tenants.
- With Social Value Engine, we produced a Social Return on Investment (SROI) assessment of ALlenergy's full Affordable Warmth service, to quantify the changes made through their support.

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People don't realise the depth of impact fuel poverty can have. The feelings of helplessness.

Lived Experience Input – Focus Group

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¹ Scottish Government (2025) Scottish House Condition Survey. Available at: www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-house-condition-survey-2023-key-findings/documents

How are social tenants impacted by unjust energy costs?

The case studies make a challenging read. They highlight systemic challenges with retrofitted heating systems. Threads run throughout where multiple households are experiencing the same challenges: high energy bills, debt, ongoing stress, and wanting to feel warmer at home. Some are living with no heating or using plug-in electric heaters because costs from their current set-up are just too high.

- Tenants are rarely retrofit experts but are expected to navigate systems as if they are. Information on tariffs, meters and operation of heating technology is inaccessible, unclear and not proactively given.
- Systems don't join up: for example, evidence is needed from multiple agencies to sell solar energy through the Smart Export Guarantee (SEG). Delays mean tenants miss out on payments for exported electricity and navigate avoidable high costs and ongoing stress.
- Metering systems are complex, and the rural roll-out of smart meters is too slow. Lack of coordination of the removal of redundant meters and reinstallation creates challenge and delay, especially for those living in rural or island communities where there are fewer local installers.
- Advice conversations are about so much more than instructions, or form-filling. Tenants are living with ongoing stress, shame, and a sense of helplessness. Compassion should underpin all support from suppliers and landlords but is often lacking.

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It can feel overwhelming for people as difficult choices have to be made or economic hardship deepens.

*Lived Experience Input –
Focus Group*

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What role does advice-giving play?

Our evaluation and social return on investment (SROI) analysis show that advice-giving works, returning a 7:1 ratio on investment. Having expert advice has practical benefits such as reduced heating costs through choosing the best tariff. Crucially, it also reduced stress. After advice, people felt confident heating their homes without fear of the cost. Having expert support empowered people to challenge poor service directly, and through the Energy Ombudsman.

- Advice leads to tangible improvements. Our survey of people ALIenergy supported found: 94% of clients had increased understanding of heating systems, bills, tariffs and meters, 90% of clients found their homes to be warmer and 79% reported increased life satisfaction.

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My goodness what a difference you have made for me.

ALIenergy client feedback

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- Sometimes advice-giving is a simple and quick process.

We are developing resources that summarise the essential knowledge users need to get the best from air-source heat pumps and the Smart Export Guarantee.

- Most advice-giving is intense: advisors spend hours on the phone navigating systems that do not match up, and inconsistent support. This will remain the case until systems fully support the customer journey.
- Much of ALIenergy's support must be delivered in-person: often root issues, such as redundant meters are discovered during home visits. Online or generic advice would not successfully fill this gap. For rural and island communities this support is essential, but time-consuming to deliver.

Not the full picture

Tenant experiences show advice-giving works. But they also highlight a system not focused on the outcomes that matter: affordable, warm homes.

During this parliament, the Scottish Government will spend billions of pounds on retrofit. To deliver bill savings, they need to ensure everyone gets the kind of advice and support ALIenergy provide. But, rather than using retrospective advice to solve problems created by the system, it needs to be designed into the system itself. This means:

- Providing a 'Warm Homes Guarantee'. This would ensure that any publicly funded or subsidised installation would deliver verifiable improvements in warmth, safety and energy savings – or be put right at no cost to the resident.
- Better coordination between funders, suppliers, retrofit agencies, landlords, tenants and homeowners – to ensure people have the right information at the right time.
- Long-term funding for local energy advice, built into the design of all energy and retrofit schemes.
- Considerations of rurality must underscore all actions taken.

Funding must reflect the cost of delivering intensive, in-home support, and the additional costs of delivering in rural and island locations. Special consideration must be given to the challenges of retrofitting rural housing stock where retrofit requires bespoke, expert support.

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I did not create these difficulties, and neither did anyone else living in different circumstances.

*Lived Experience Input –
Focus Group*

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Where do we go from here?

Advice-giving works for supporting social tenants transitioning to sustainable energy sources. A better solution, however, would be a system that can be easily navigated through transparency and clear information with bespoke advice easily accessible to those that need it.

Summary

- Tenants are paying the price for systems that are not easy to navigate, and information around energy which is intimidating and inaccessible.
- Better coordination and distribution of information would support households in getting the most out of their retrofitted heating systems.
- With the current systemic challenges, advice-giving is often intense and needs to be delivered in person, which in rural areas can mean substantial travel for advisors. Funding for rural provision must account for this.
- Long-term funding for advice-giving organisations would free up time to deliver support, and for sustainable planning.
- System-level change that would improve conditions for many social tenants, and others living in retrofitted homes includes a 'Warm Homes Guarantee' with built in accountability for improvements in the retrofitting process.
- Systemic improvements would act as an investment that would reduce costs. Effective planning and investment in providing information and accountability in the retrofit process would mean less funding and time then spent on fixing avoidable challenges.
- In moving forward equitably, special consideration must be given to rural or island locations where advice-giving or installation is not sufficient to address the challenges with grid-capacity, infrastructure or low-quality housing stock.
- Taken together, these resources show that investments in accessible and local advice return seven times benefit, and can lower rural cost premiums in energy, while keeping people warmer, improving wellbeing, lowering stress and benefiting health.

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