



Community Social Care

Fuel Poverty: Jackie's story

V/o:

Jackie Carlin, who's now an advice worker, has experienced debt herself. A friend told her that a dry meter would be cheaper to run.

Jackie:

It's just a meter that you don't have to pay as you go, they bill you, so I got that one in, and they didn't come to read it for a year and although I kept saying I'm going to have to 'phone them you just, it's not a priority, and it was a year before I actually got into gear and said look, I'm going to have to 'phone them. The Hydro Electric sent me a bill for nine hundred pounds which I couldn't afford to pay at once and they gave me seven days to pay it, then they asked me for £57 a week which was approximately three-quarters of my income support per week, which was unbelievable because there was no way I could live off that.

V/o:

Ian Treaner helped her out as well.

Ian:

I'd worked for Hydro Electric in a fairly senior position for sixteen years so I know the billing system fairly well. I'd discovered that there was an inaccuracy on the billing system so, based on that, they actually give her a hundred pound reduction on the bill. We were then able to have a card meter installed and we recovered that outstanding money at £2.50 per week which is a much more sensible option because if the utilities make unrealistic payment requests the tenant will default, and of course the whole scenario starts up again, and the debt builds up again, they come back to us, so it's a two-way thing that we are actually trying to ask them to act responsibly and really we make an agreement, now let's stick to this agreement like, because there's no point in exacerbating the situation that they keep continually coming back to us, so we have to empower them to let's act sensibly here.

V/o:

The use of card meters can be a solution but they're not without their drawbacks.

Ian:

It is a higher rate as such because they're never really enjoying any of the benefits that a direct debit customer will enjoy; they will enjoy a 4% discount. But my understanding, I see someone who's going to the post office every week and paying £15 is just as good as a direct debit customer, but these benefits are never passed on to the card meter customers as we like to know them.

Jackie:

I also know numerous amounts of people who get into problems with their electricity because of not being able to pay, and they get the card meters and they cut their cards and they can use it twice, but they don't realise that when the bill, eventually when the meter's eventually read they haven't actually bought the amount of cards that they're using, so they're going to be billed anyway, and the cycle goes on again, people can't afford to pay them.

Ian:

Others have looked at other means of having electricity free of charge, they've looked at what we call a black box, that's where you can actually connect this to the meter and that actually starts reversing dials on the meter. Yeah, there's quite a cottage industry involved that because you can physically buy them outright or you can actually hire them. It's got to such a stage that people know exactly when the meter reader's coming, they've got a fair idea when he comes, so what they do is they use them in between the year for perhaps six months of

the year. Now you would think I think that they would maybe receive bills of thirty, forty pounds, but they're quite sensible that they still receive bills of maybe two, three hundred pound, but in fact they're maybe using four, five, six hundred pounds-worth of electricity so some of them are quite shrewd in how they operate that. Others are not so worldly wise and they end up with bills of ten pound and Hydro Electric know yeah, there's something going on here, we have to find out what's happening there and they normally do.

V/o:

Other people who have no wish to defraud the utility companies often make ends meet in a very simple way as Angela Yih from Age Concern, Scotland, explains.

Angela:

I think older people are some, certainly many older people would be likely not to spend the amount of money they need to keep the houses warm because they're worried about bills, they're worried about getting into debt. We know that many older people choose pre-payment meters, for instance, which is an expensive way of paying for your fuel, and the reason they do that is that they're basically assured that they won't get a bill they can't pay, but in effect they disconnect themselves if they can no longer afford to feed the meter, and we're working with Scottish Power to try and persuade them to change the system where pre-payment fuel meters don't cost any more, there shouldn't be the slightest bit of extra charge because after all people are paying in advance. I also think older people like to have a range of options about methods of payment and many of them like to pay cash in small sums, which doesn't appeal to many of the fuel suppliers, but nevertheless the sort of profits that these companies make, and the fact that they're delivering a service that is everyone's right, well we would say you just have to make these allowances, people should have options to pay the way that suits them, people who want to pay by direct debit should be allowed to do so, people who want to pay with cash should do so. And we must remember that many people on lower income, older people especially, don't have bank accounts, and banks won't allow you to open one unless you've got a fairly regular income.

V/o:

Jackie Carlin's experience in the Dundee district of Charleston also confirms what Angela says.

Jackie:

It's very hard to get a bank account if you haven't got a job anyway, so yeah a lot of people don't have bank accounts. If you've got something in Charleston Microcredit Union, which started up a few years ago, and that's like a people's bank, and yes it's easier for the people to access because it's here in Charleston and the collections are twice a week, and people can borrow from there, but obviously only so much, you know, part of what they've put in, so that makes it easier for the people to actually run a bank account and borrow. That's the only facility apart from if they go to lenders like Provident, people like they're that, and then they're paying horrendous interest on that. I know first hand, you know, how much they take back on that. Yeah, you find more people are going towards these people, that that's their only source of getting a loan, either the Credit Union or these Provident's and different places like that.

Thomas:

We had money lenders - they rob you left right and centre. If you borrow a thousand pounds from them, you're paying over two thousand pounds back. Never go to money lenders. You know why you've not got any grey hair. But I didn't worry, that were no worry with me, fine. OK they send you a letter, they come up to the house, tell them a story.....oh we'll be in next week and I'll give you a wee bit extra money. Don't get involved with money lenders.