



## **Community Social Care**

*Fuel Poverty: Florence's story*

### **V/o:**

Florence Foster is a Manchester woman who has lived in Dundee for many years. She's now in sheltered accommodation but previously was renting from a private landlord. Together with her friend Doreen she recalls what the place was like.

### **Florence:**

When you first went in it was a long hallway and the bedroom was on the right when you went in, that was just a small bedroom. There was a built-in wardrobe which was absolutely green with mould, I put my clothes in it not knowing, I had to throw them out, they were all stinking and green with mould, that's when I found out how damp it was.

### **Doreen:**

The main heating was in the living room which was an electric fire, of two bar electric fire.

### **Florence:**

Three bar.

### **Doreen:**

Three bar, no you couldn't, she wouldn't run three bars, but I mean I know when I was up you felt the coldness through your feet, you did.

### **Florence:**

And I think if you'd have had three fires in there you still wouldn't have got that bedroom dry, was getting bad colds and that, you know. I was in my bed for a fortnight at a time, wasn't I, and then that last time I wouldn't have cared but I got a needle every year for the flu and I took secondary flu, they call it, just about killed me. I went down to the landlord and asked them to do something, and they told me to open the windows, and I said you are joking, it's freezing, I said plus I'm on the ground floor, I'd be robbed, I was in a bad place up there. I says could you get those whirly things, you know the whirly things in the window, oh no, she says, we couldn't do that - this was the receptionist, I couldn't get past her - plus my kitchen window, they put a new window in when they renovated the place and they'd have been as well leaving it out, it was freezing, the draught that was coming through was nobody's business.

### **V/o:**

Angela Yih at Age Concern Scotland has also come across situations like this.

### **Angela:**

It's quite difficult to improve conditions in the private rented sector because it's not regulated. There should be some kind of regulation where houses that become unfit to live in, landlords shouldn't be allowed to let them out. We also believe landlords should often, you know, should be encouraged to join in ways of improving house and be helped. Sometimes when you work with landlords and offer them grants, what the result is an improvement in people's quality of life and an improvement in the housing stock, so we're not keen on the local authority attitude we often come across that we shouldn't be giving any financial help to landlords. If they're offering a service and going to offer a service that's needed, then they're entitled to help as well. Older people in general have lower static incomes than other groups in the population and we have identified over the years that many older people live in the poorest housing conditions that there are in Scotland, particularly older home owners; the older you become as a older home owner, the more likely your house is to be needing quite significant repairs, and also in the private rented sector which has proportionately anyway the

worst housing conditions in the country. The older you become as an older home owner the more likely your house is to be needing quite significant repairs.

**V/o:**

Under the Government's Home Energy Efficient Scheme, called Warm Deal in Scotland, grants of up to five hundred pounds are available to people who qualify. And as a consequence of the Home Energy Conservation Act, or HECA, all local authorities are required to have an energy efficiency strategy for their housing stock, but so far councils have not been legally required to fulfil these strategies.

Good afternoon I'm here to pay my account.

One week?

Yes please.

Just check.

**V/o:**

At Hamilton in the Clyde Valley, pensioner Elizabeth Belk is a home owner. She's taking part in a trial scheme run by Scottish Power and EGA, the organisation that has UK government funding to spend on energy efficiency projects. Under the Warm Deal she's been able to get insulation work done at her home.

**E:**

After it was done, I mean it was funny you could get into the rooms and at different times you'd go in you'd swear blind there was a heater on, but it was the heat coming through the loft down you feel. Some days it depends I think which way the wind's blowing, right you know, but different days you have actually switch your heating off because it's too warm. I put it down to the lowest but the heat, with the doors being shut, the heat off the storage heater, it's only a wee storage heater but it's with the kitchen being so wee that you feel the heat everywhere you're going. My grandson'll say if he's been out late and he comes in and the central heating has clicked on, he'll say Nana, do you need to need to make this palce like a steamie but it's not, it's just the heat, the house is holding the heat and that's just how it is.

**V/o:**

Scottish Power in the shape of Colin Gibson worked out a weekly payment regime for Mrs Belk. She now pays fifteen pounds a week through summer and winter, and during the trial period to check that she doesn't go over this limit; he comes to read the meter each month.

As part of a scheme she also received a benefits health check from EGA. When her local DSS told her that she wasn't entitled to any more benefits, Mrs Belk turned to EGA for advice.

**E:**

Right, I says, that's fine, I'll just notify EGA. You say I'm not entitled to it. So I 'phoned them up on a freephone number and I said to them who I was, and they said yes, how could they help me, and I said to them remember you told me that I was entitled to, yes, I says well the DSS I'm not entitled to it. Just give me a minute to check it again, she read over everything that I'd told her, how much I had, how much my husband had, my mobility, and she says I'll get this checked out by my boss, I'll 'phone you back, she says, we'll not hold up the lines, I'll 'phone you back. She 'phoned me back in an hour and a half and she says, Mrs Belk, my boss still says you're entitled to this money, I'll tell you what, she says, I'll put it in the post tonight, I'll work it all out for them exactly what you're entitled to. EGA had worked out that I was entitled to income support with my pension to pay my mortgage, which I was not getting, and if it hadn't been for them I would never have received this extra money because I would never have known about it. And the pension went up; the DSS had to put it up from £39 to £51.

**V/o:**

Wrongly calculated benefits or no benefits at all is a constant problem which Angela Yee is well aware of.

**Angela:**

Every year we have a 'Your Rights' week in Age Concern, the movement in general, Wales, Ireland, England and Scotland, to encourage older people to take up the benefits they're entitled to. We're not really aware if it has a great success rate. We tend to be preaching to the converted. The people who don't claim benefits either don't understand the benefits system, don't respond to an advert, or don't want to claim the benefits. The older the age group the more reluctant people seem to be, particularly the people over 75 come from an area where there is still a stigma attached to any kind of benefit, and also people have low expectations and are living in conditions that are so below what you and I would expect but they have been so used to that, they actually believe they have enough, because they don't know what it's like to have any more.

**V/o:**

When Miss Foster moved out of her old cold house to sheltered accommodation, she found out how things could be.

**Florence:**

I think it's great, yeah, though mind you the first week I come in I could not stick the heat, I was sweating.

**Doreen:**

You're acclimatised to it now, so you're fine, and that's the whole house heated.

**V/o:**

But if the 738,000 households presently classed as fuel-poor are to end up feeling as happy as Miss Foster, there remains a lot more work to be done. Ian Trainer recognises that money is needed from somewhere if the old Dundee tenements are to be made more habitable.

**Ian:**

There's really no way that we could insulate these properties with the current funding that's available through the grants' system. We could insulate the lofts but for someone who doesn't have a loft, basically all we could do is provide some draught-proofing which really doesn't help to keep the heat within the fabric of the building. The grant really has to be enlarged so that we could basically go in and either internally lag the property to keep the heat in, or clad them from the exterior to make them a lot warmer than what they physically are, because they are difficult to heat. Really we look to Government really to plough more money in to try and overcome the problems that we do face in Dundee.

**Angela:**

The Scottish Executive have gone some way to recognise the need to address fuel poverty and energy inefficiency in the housing stock, but a lot of the measures are fairly piecemeal and difficult to become aware of, difficult to utilise, difficult to target to the people who need it most. What we'd be looking for would be more of a strategy that's linked and co-ordinated from one particular reference point, for instance, the Home Energy Conservation Act makes local authorities responsible for measuring energy efficiency in their stock. Now if they had the proper resources and staffing the HECA Unit, as it's called, could take the lead in co-ordinating a policy at local area level and we might get somewhere then, because we would have targets that are measurable and we'd know if we'd achieved much. At the moment all we know is that the Warm Deal grant has met its targets in terms of money being spent, but it hasn't actually met its target as far as we know in terms of the types of householders they wanted to reach. There are certain things that one can't afford if one's on a low salary, but to be able to heat your home should not have anything to do with how much you earn. You need a decent house, a well-insulated house, an efficient heating system, and you don't really have to pay a lot of money to keep warm.