



## Fuel poverty in remote and rural Scotland: focus group analysis

Scottish Fuel Poverty Advisory Panel  
in conjunction with ALIenergy, Scarf  
and Tighean Innse Gall

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## Key findings

Between January and May 2025, ALLenergy, Scarf, and TIG were commissioned by the Scottish Fuel Poverty Advisory Panel (SFPAP) to carry out focus groups looking at rural and remote fuel poverty. 81 participants took part in 12 focus groups in rural and remote areas of Scotland. Focus groups were held in the following areas:

- Aberdeenshire - Stonehaven (6 participants)
- Perth and Kinross - Perth (8 participants)
- Highland - Thurso, Lairg (24 participants)
- Argyll and Bute - Oban, Taynuilt, Campbeltown (31 participants)
- Na h-Eileanan Siar (the Western Isles) - Stornoway and Galson (12 participants)

The following themes were discussed by participants:

### 1. Rural specific drivers of fuel poverty

- Participants highlighted that colder, wetter, and windier weather in rural Scotland mean that there is a higher heating requirement throughout the year, with no opportunity to create a buffer in summer to help pay for winter
- Participants said that a lack of insulation in housing combined with local weather conditions causes condensation, damp, and mould in properties
- Participants also highlighted challenges in accessing local resources, including supermarkets, post offices, support services, employment and public transport. This can make accessing energy challenging and can also cause wider affordability issues
- In terms of unregulated fuels, participants felt that the upfront cost of filling an oil tank, or buying coal or LPG is too high for someone in fuel poverty to afford. Participants discussed a range of coping mechanisms, including monitoring prices and buying when they are lower
- Participants also discussed the challenges of using all electric heating systems. Storage heaters were described as being expensive to run, exacerbated by a lack of supplier choice for their meter type and high electricity standing charges. Participants discussed coping mechanisms, including self-disconnection
- A small number of participants had had heat pumps installed, and while they enjoyed an increased level of thermal comfort they had seen no bill reduction and found large bill fluctuations hard to manage

## **2. Rural fuel poverty since the COVID-19 pandemic, cost of living and energy crisis**

- Participants in the Western Isles highlighted that they had always struggled with heating costs and viewed blaming the cost of living crisis or COVID-19 pandemic for this as a “bit of a get out clause”
- Many other participants generally felt that their energy usage increased during the COVID-19 pandemic because they and their families were at home more, using more energy. This occurred at a time when some participants’ income went down resulting in energy debt, which has continued to build up during the energy crisis
- Participants highlighted that the energy crisis is not over for them, but that they now do not get any support from schemes like the Energy Bills Support Scheme
- Participants described various coping mechanisms including using warm spaces; choosing between eating and heating; only heating certain rooms or themselves with hot water bottles and blankets, and using washing machines and other white goods at night, during off peak electricity rates

## **3. Metering**

- Participants felt that the radio teleswitch (RTS) switch off and its consequences have been poorly advertised and as a result there was a lack of public awareness
- Participants who had tried to have their RTS meters changed had faced challenges including a lack of understanding of metering issues from suppliers; supplier misinformation; a lack of trained engineers; an inability to make engineer appointments, and appointment cancellations
- Participants discussed issues with getting engineer appointments in relation to smart meters too. They also faced issues with connectivity, with a lack of signal meaning that they either couldn’t get a smart meter installed or that, when installed, it did not work in smart mode
- However, a small number of participants who had successfully had smart meters installed discussed their benefits, including helping with budgeting and simplifying the process of topping up for people with a pre-payment meter

## **4. Support interventions**

- Participants felt that the support they had received from third sector organisations was vital, emphasising the importance of having someone local to talk to

- Participants highlighted that support could be improved through more partnership working between organisations, and more of a focus on holistic working. The need for more funding for support organisations was also stressed
- Participants also discussed the need for energy market reform, including the introduction of a social tariff, zonal pricing, and standing charge reform
- Participants had a number of recommendations relating to social and new build housing. The importance of insulation and quality windows and doors was stressed, as was the installation of renewable heating systems instead of oil or storage heating systems
- Participants in one focus group described experiencing issues with the quality of work by “overnight contractors” (contractors who come to an area specially to do a job) when carrying out retrofitting projects/heating system changes. Participants said that they would prefer to use local contractors
- Participants in multiple focus groups felt that wind and solar farms should make higher and fairer contributions to local communities and Scotland as a whole. The need for local community ownership of wind developments was also discussed

## Introduction

One of the Scottish Fuel Poverty Advisory Panel's **key themes** for 2024/25 was the systemic impact of rural and remote fuel poverty. The Panel are also committed to ensuring that their work is informed by those with lived experience of fuel poverty. Therefore, the Panel commissioned Argyll, Lomond and the Islands Energy Agency (ALLenergy), Scarf, and Tighean Innse Gall (TIG) to carry out focus groups with those experiencing fuel poverty. Topic guides were developed by SFPAP and focus groups were facilitated in-person by the three partner organisations. As each organisation is set up differently and works with people in different ways appropriate to their client relationship, the format and facilitation of the focus groups was determined by organisations themselves.<sup>1</sup> Anonymised notes from these sessions were provided to the Panel's Social Researcher, who analysed and produced a report on the findings. 12 focus groups with 81 participants were held between January and May 2025 in the following locations:

- Aberdeenshire - Stonehaven (6 participants)
- Perth and Kinross - Perth (8 participants)
- Highland - Thurso, Lairg (24 participants)
- Argyll and Bute - Oban, Taynuilt, Campbeltown (31 participants)
- Na h-Eileanan Siar (the Western Isles) - Stornoway and Galson (12 participants)

Participants included a mix of families, single people, couples, and retired people, as well as those living in social housing, home owners, and private rented sector tenants. There was also a mix of heating types, including ground source and air source heat pumps, storage heaters, and oil or LPG boilers. Some participants were benefit recipients while others were not in receipt of benefits

Participants were asked about **rural fuel poverty drivers; fuel poverty since the COVID-19 pandemic and energy crisis; metering issues**, and **support interventions**. The interview guide provided to the partner organisations is included in **Annex A**. Participants were provided with a thank you voucher for their local supermarket or similar, for each session attended.

The Panel is very grateful to all the focus groups participants who took the time to discuss these issues, and the organisations who we worked with. The findings from this research will help inform the Panel's 2025/26 continuing work on rural and remote fuel poverty, which will focus on solutions.

## Theme one: rural specific drivers of fuel poverty

### Weather

Participants spoke about the role weather plays in driving fuel poverty in rural and remote Scotland. The weather is colder, wetter, and windier, with the wind chill increasing the threat of hypothermia. Island based participants highlighted that there is a lack of understanding of how windy it can be in their areas. One participant mentioned that the wood burner which they use frequently for heat goes through a lot more wood than what they were used to on the mainland due to the wind causing

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<sup>1</sup> ALLenergy chose to split themes across focus groups, with two themes per focus group, while Scarf and TIG covered all four themes in each focus group.

it to burn faster. Participants also discussed that it is darker where they live, so more electricity is required for lighting as well as heating.

Winters were viewed as lasting between 5 and 6 months, from around October to April and with frosts sometimes still occurring in May. Even in summer heating often needs to be on due to dampness in order to dry clothes, and because of wind. Weather is also inconsistent and it is therefore difficult to set thermostats effectively. The result of this is a higher heating requirement throughout the year, with no opportunity to create a buffer in the summer to help pay for the winter. One participant said:

“It’s a nightmare. One day it can be glorious sunshine and the next freezing. You can’t plan for it or set your heating for those kinds of extremes of up and down temperatures. Windows need replaced, carpets are thin with no underlay. The heating costs and standing charges are horrendous. Heating costs are far higher in rural places.”

As a result of cold, wet, and windy weather, participants highlighted that they are more likely to be at home in the winter, thereby increasing fuel costs. Those on pre-payment meters were viewed as struggling the most over winter because they do not have the benefit of paying the same amount all year round like those who pay by direct debits. Participants in one focus group described heating a home as a “second mortgage”, stating that in the winter months heating their home is more than their mortgage. This is in spite of the fact that their house never actually feels warm.

In addition to long, cold, and windy winters resulting in a higher heating requirement, participants also discussed the need to spend more on winter clothing. One participant living in the Western Isles said that since moving to the island they had sized up their jackets so that they can fit more clothing underneath.

## Housing

Participants spoke about poor housing as a driver of fuel poverty. Some of the challenges discussed were non-specific to rural areas, for example feeling a lack of control when it comes to energy efficiency measures in a rented home. Some participants were aware of schemes including ECO4 and Warmer Homes Scotland but felt that they wouldn’t help them since they live in social housing. Participants also highlighted a lack of affordable housing.

Other housing-related topics discussed were more specific to rural areas. In general, housing was highlighted as being older and of a poorer quality than the Scottish average. A lack of insulation in rural housing was also felt to contribute to the high cost of heating. These issues are exacerbated by weather conditions in rural Scotland - wet, humid, and with long periods of cold - which can cause condensation, damp, and mould in properties. In order to stay warm, participants in two focus groups said that they live in one room, but this causes the unused rooms to get black mould. This was particularly the case for single people living in larger homes where they’d previously lived with their family.

In two focus groups participants highlighted particular problems with social housing in their area. They felt that much of the social housing stock was inadequate for the local climate and extremely inefficient. In some cases, high costs have been incurred



by participants to stop damp issues in council properties. Where a council has provided dehumidifiers it was felt that they should contribute to the high cost of running them.

Windows and doors were also a particular concern. One participant said:

“As much as I heat my house, the moment the heating is turned off it’s freezing because the bad workmanship of the council means I have huge gaps around the doors - I can see daylight.”

Another participant said:

“Due to our exposed area and our extreme climate our windows and doors get hit hard... It’s great getting all the insulation and heating etc., but if you have bad windows and doors it’s like an open space for wind to get through, which wouldn’t be hard where we live.”

### **Lack of local resources/infrastructure**

Participants highlighted challenges in accessing local resources. This can make accessing energy challenging, but also cause wider affordability issues. Participants discussed their limited access to supermarkets, hospitals, and other support services. In particular in relation to supermarkets, participants highlighted a lack of choice resulting in higher costs. One participant in an island location said that they have:

“no choice - on the island we have a very restricted choice of what we can purchase and therefore this usually means more expensive than mainland location, this is eating into my income.”

Public transport issues were also viewed as particularly challenging, and result in difficulty in seeking out free heat.

Participants in two focus groups discussed challenges around accessing post offices. In rural and remote Scotland post offices are often few and far between but are also essential for topping up pre-payment keys or cards. One participant said:

“Anyone with British Gas cannot top up at paypoints, and have to use Post Offices. In some areas the nearest Post Office is a 20 mile round trip away, with limited public transport - which means hanging around for several hours before a return bus. If you are fortunate enough to live near the Post Office, it is only open limited hours. The Post Office mobile van cannot redeem fuel vouchers.”

Participants in one focus group also discussed the fact that work in their local area is often low paid and seasonal. As a result of low incomes, some participants highlighted affordability challenges in affording internet in their home but require it in order to access social security.

Participants in one focus group highlighted the fact that it is challenging to access tradespeople when you live on an island. Material and delivery costs are also higher. This is especially the case when it comes to getting trained workers to service newer

heating systems, and this can result in difficulty maintaining systems. Participants in this group would prefer to use local contractors rather than contractors who come to the island specially to carry out work.

### **Energy source - unregulated fuels**

Participants who used unregulated fuels<sup>2</sup> were asked how they manage the cost of purchasing them. The upfront cost of filling an oil tank or buying coal or LPG was described as being too high for someone in fuel poverty to afford, with minimum orders the norm and a lack of supplier competition. One participant said:

“Most families experiencing fuel poverty cannot afford the initial outlay needed for an oil tank to be filled up and don’t get the option to pay over a few months as the first fill has to be paid in advance. This leads to them turning to using portable heaters that are very costly to run.”

Participants across focus groups discussed various coping mechanisms to help manage this costs:

- Setting money aside each month so that they are able to buy fuel in bulk over winter
- Saving fuel money ready for delivery
- Monitoring oil and gas prices and buying when it is cheaper
- Paying regular direct debits to oil/LPG company, but participants usually still have to pay more once delivery happens as prices keep increasing
- Purchasing logs in bulk
- Collecting firewood from around the village
- Some participants also flagged that there had been waves of oil theft in their local area

A participant in one focus group mentioned that some practices have changed since the COVID-19 pandemic, with oil no longer being bulk bought with neighbours.

Participants discussed challenges in getting deliveries of unregulated fuels. There is a lack of flexibility for coal/oil/gas, with some suppliers only providing coal deliveries every two weeks. In addition, some suppliers will not deliver bottled gas or coal, instead requiring collection. This is difficult for elderly or disabled people to manage. Island communities were discussed as facing particular challenges. As well as requiring minimum orders, there are some suppliers who won’t travel to islands unless there are five customers requiring fuel. Suppliers also need to factor in the cost of travelling on commercial ferries into the price.

### **Energy source - electricity/storage heaters**

Participants discussed a number of challenges and coping mechanisms related to electric heating systems. Challenges particularly related to the use of storage heaters. Storage heaters were described as being very expensive to run, exacerbated by a lack of supplier choice for their meter type and high electricity standing charges. One participant said:

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<sup>2</sup> Such as heating oil, LPG, biomass, communal heating, and solid mineral fuel (including wood and coal).

“If there is a sudden cold snap when using storage heaters you need to use plug in heaters to deal with the sudden cold - these are even more expensive to run.”

Participants described a number of coping mechanisms:

- Managing cost by paying electricity quarterly on receipt of bill
- Using a portable gas hob to cook rather than their electric hob in order to save on electricity costs
- Cutting gas use in order to afford electricity (if property has access to gas)
- Self-disconnection amongst pre-payment meter customers

Participants in one focus group described frustration that they must be experts in managing their heating costs and system, otherwise they will be caught out.

Participants in two focus groups described a distrust of suppliers, with some stating that they'd cancelled their electricity direct debit as a result. Other participants who were on a fixed direct debit felt that it was very high during the summer since those on electric heating systems use a lot less electricity during the summer.

Two participants had replaced their storage heating systems with air source heat pumps. They said that they had not seen a financial benefit in the form of reduced bills but do have improved thermal comfort in their homes. However, they did highlight that there can be large bill fluctuations which is hard to manage. They face bills of £600 in the winter months compared to £180 in summer, and because they do not like paying by direct debit due to a distrust of energy suppliers they have no choice but to budget for this themselves, which is challenging.

## **Theme two: rural fuel poverty since the COVID-19 pandemic, cost of living and energy crisis**

Across focus groups held in Argyll and Bute, Highland, Aberdeenshire, and Perth and Kinross, participants discussed the particular challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic and cost of living crisis has presented for them. Participants in the Western Isles, however, felt that they have always struggled with heating costs and that blaming cost of living or COVID was a “bit of a get out clause”. One participant said:

“there is no difference it has always been a struggle, yes the price has increased which has had an effect the last two years however it feels like a free for all for the utility companies.”

As such, the majority of the below discussion of the energy crisis and COVID-19 pandemic comes from the Argyll and Bute, Highland, Aberdeenshire, and Perth and Kinross focus groups.

### **Energy usage during the COVID-19 pandemic**

Participants across many of the groups felt that their usage had increased during the COVID-19 pandemic because they were at home more and naturally using more energy, often with less money coming in. Some participants continue to work from

home and their energy usage therefore remains higher than pre-COVID levels. Other participants who were not in work did not think their energy usage increased during the pandemic.

Some participants with children discussed the financial challenges that having their children home from school caused. One participant discussed how she had to heat her home more because she “couldn’t have [her] kids being cold”. Energy wasn’t the only increased cost, and this participant explained how she also struggled with food costs:

“food costs increased because I no longer had access to school meals, but the kids wanted snacks more often.”

Home schooling meant more electricity was being used - not just from heating but because children were doing online learning from home. Furthermore, devices that would normally be used and charged at work were now being plugged in at home as people were increasingly encouraged to work from home.

In one focus group it was flagged that participants who have pre-payment meters needed to top up larger amounts to avoid going out too much, so they had to plan more carefully.

As costs increased, and in some cases income declined, some participants sought coping mechanisms such as self rationing and disconnection as a way to manage. Some participants stopped using their gas as they couldn’t afford to use both gas and electricity. Others switched off their storage heaters as they couldn’t afford to run them.

Participants discussed the long term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some built up debt, and found it harder to get help as a result of the pandemic. This debt has been worsened by the energy crisis and, for many, is still a major issue today. In one focus group, participants who live in social housing discussed how they did not have the benefit of “mortgage holidays” during the pandemic, as was the case for some home owners. They built up rent arrears, which are still being dealt with today. Finally, participants in one focus group discussed the impact struggling to pay their energy bills during the pandemic had on their mental health.

### **Energy usage during the energy crisis**

Across the board participants have struggled during the energy crisis, and it was evident that the same issues affected everyone, no matter their financial position. Participants felt strongly that the energy crisis is not over, highlighting that they cannot afford to heat their homes sufficiently. Many are using Calor gas fires instead of expensive storage heaters, and some have not had any heating all winter. One participant said:

“We are just getting by then the costs go up again and we have no idea where the money is going to come from.”

Participants highlighted a lack of help to cover emergency costs. Energy costs remain high but there is now no Energy Bills Support Scheme. Participants in one focus group flagged that any kind of emergency credit/friendly credit/loans from

energy companies ultimately put people into or deepened debt which they are still dealing with. Participants also felt that debt repayments set by suppliers are too high and unaffordable. There is no way out of debt as participants struggle to pay for what they are using, let alone trying to clear debt as well. It was emphasised that energy suppliers have little concept of how little people on certain benefits have to live on and energy companies' customer service has been unhelpful to participants. Issues with energy companies were exacerbated during the energy crisis as participants could not switch suppliers.

Participants in one focus group discussed the unfair treatment by energy companies of customers who do not want to pay via direct debit. One participant said:

“Attitudes need to change for people who are not on direct debit and therefore pay more for it [their energy]. I don't want to pay direct debit as I do not trust the utility company not to increase my direct debit without me knowing. The control that utility companies have is wrong and needs to be corrected.”

Participants discussed various coping mechanisms which they've used through the energy crisis:

- Warm spaces - participants in one focus group discussed how they rely on warm space but as a result of local authority budget cuts, participants are fearful of them being closed
- Participants often have to choose between heating and eating, and food bank usage is high. One participant said: “I can't go back to work as childcare costs are so high so I would be working for nothing and not being with my kids. We must rely on my partner's income alone. We have had to limit ourselves to one meal a day in the past so that our children can eat.”
- One participant discussed planning their meals in order to save money on energy by, for example, cooking something quick
- Participants receive support from the third sector but some felt that the sector is relied on too heavily
- Participants in Lairg said that the District Community Trust<sup>3</sup> there provides £250 fuel vouchers
- Participants in one focus group described being hypervigilant about the electricity they use - turning off lights and using candles instead
- Participants in one groups said that they have started using their washing machines and other white goods at night, during off peak electricity rates. They have concerns over fire risks doing this, but felt they have no choice
- Participants in multiple focus groups discussed who they live in one room and heat themselves using blankets, extra clothes, hot water bottles and hot drinks.
- One participant stated that sometimes they steal small items to sell for cash in order to top up their electricity meter

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<sup>3</sup> Lairg and District Community Initiatives is a group set up to improve the lives and experiences of the community of Lairg.

## Theme three: metering

Participants were asked about their knowledge and experience of changing meters. The RTS meter is a type of electricity meter that operates via long-wave radio technology. The technology that supports Radio Teleswitch (RTS) meters will end after 30 June 2025, and these focus groups were held in the run up to that date. Without the technology to tell RTS meters when to switch between peak and off-peak rates they will no longer work properly. In most cases RTS meters (and indeed other types of meters present in rural households) should be replaced with smart meters.

### Radio teleswitch (RTS) meters

Participants overwhelmingly felt that there is a lack of public awareness about the RTS switch off and its consequences. It was felt that it has been poorly advertised, and participants had particular concerns for older and more vulnerable people who could be left without heating or with their heating permanently on. Those participants who did know about the switch off often only knew about it because they saw it on the Lorraine Kelly show. Some participants had been contacted by their supplier about the switch off and had assumed it was just telling them that they should get a smart meter. They did not want a smart meter so they binned the letter.

Participants who had attempted to get an RTS meter changed spoke about facing difficulties. They highlighted that contacting suppliers to discuss metering is not a straight forward process - you can spend hours on hold, being passed from one department to another without getting much help. They felt that energy suppliers don't seem to know how to update or change old meters because there's a lack of RTS experienced/trained people. Participants also discussed feelings of confusion. Some participants had received misinformation from energy suppliers who told them that because they are on the priority services register their electricity won't be cut off. Others had struggled to identify if they had a meter impacted by the RTS switch off, and where participants had had engineers out to change meters, some had been told that they could not change two meters to one.

Where participants had attempted to have their meter changed, many struggled to get an appointment with an engineer. Where some did manage to get an appointment their appointment was cancelled or the engineer did not turn up. One participant was told by their supplier that if they wanted to change the meter they would need to change the wiring, which they would have to pay for themselves. The participant felt that if it's not the consumer or supplier's choice to turn off the signal then they should not have to pay for any upgrades.

One participant who had managed to have their RTS meter changed to a single rate meter now has a blank meter with no information displayed, and is also unable to access anything on their supplier's website.

### Smart meters

As with RTS meters, participants discussed challenges in getting a smart meter fitted. One participant said:



“It was over seven months of regular monthly calls to the energy provider, to firstly see if the meter type I had was suitable... [for] smart. Then once this happened around four months in it took around three months for an available engineer to attend.”

One participant described the stress the process of trying to get a smart meter has caused them:

“The added stress, anxiety, and time to call these utility companies is tiring and I cannot do it anymore. I have been fighting with them since November 2024 and now they say that they complain doesn’t exist.”

Another participant discussed waiting several months and having several appointments cancelled due to a “lack of engineers in the area”. The participant did note that now she has a smart meter she does find it slightly easier to budget for her energy use.

One participant who had been very wary of switching to a smart meter did so in the end. They thought it was going to be a very complicated process but it wasn’t for them. Now the participant doesn’t look at the in-home display if they don’t have to but finds that it does help with budgeting. As a pre-payment user it also means that they can top up easily now without having to put a key into the meter. While generally viewing the decision to get a smart meter as a good one, the participant did think that the approach used by their supplier to convince them to get a smart meter was “underhand” as it relied on misinformation about the RTS switch off.

Participants also discussed their inability to get a smart meter due to signalling issues:

“I live in what is considered rural Perthshire, although we are less than 20 minutes from major urban centres. However, I am unable to update or change my electricity meter to smart.”

Some participants got as far as having an engineer come to their home before they were told that they could not have a smart meter fitted because of the connectivity issue:

“I have a pre-programmed Economy 10 meter, however, whilst the Wi-Fi signal is strong, the mobile signal is very poor in this area. Therefore, when a smart meter was attempted to be installed the engineer was unable to commission this, and as such left the non-smart meter in place.”

Some participants had had smart meters installed but they were operating in ‘dumb’ rather than smart mode. These participants still receive estimated bills and are required to provide meter readings. Of those participants who had smart meters, some also said that they find the In-Home Display hard to read.

Participants in one focus group discussed the fact the many suppliers only offer better deals/tariffs to customers with smart meters. This was seen as unfair and unhelpful. One participant had taken a supplier to the Energy Ombudsman, who had found in the participant’s favour. However, the participant described the process of

filing a complaint as “like a full time job”, noting that “people do not have time for this”.

## **Theme four: support interventions**

Participants were asked about their experiences in accessing support and what would make the biggest difference in their life.

### **Third sector support**

Participants particularly focused on support they’d received from local charities. Support included:

- Advice
- Home visits
- Fuel vouchers
- Debt write offs
- Food vouchers
- Distribution of products to help with energy usage, including air fryers and electric blankets
- Help with suppliers
- Referrals to other help available

Participants thought that third sector support is vital and can really help their mental health. One participant said:

“The support I received I feel like it literally saved me. I was in so much debt and with Christmas coming up and my child to take care of I didn’t see a way out but the help I received made me realise that people do care. They helped me so much with a payment to clear my fuel debt and have helped me stay out of debt.”

Another participant said:

“Without the support of you guys many of us wouldn’t be able to top up our meters or feed our kids. I have been very grateful for the support received and I know other have been too.”

Support with contacting suppliers was also seen as being very important. It was described as “taking the stress and anxiety away” as it provided a support network, rather than leaving someone to handle the energy company on their own.

The locality of organisations was stressed as being important because it ensures understanding of local issues, in particular issues related to rurality. It was felt that having the support services in prominent locations in towns makes them accessible and welcoming. In one focus group it was discussed that small communities can mean that advisers know the clients, but while this can sometimes cause embarrassment this is not often the case as people are used to living in a small community.



## Other support

Conversations across focus groups primarily focused on support provided by the third sector, but participants did briefly discuss other support. In one focus group GPs and job centres were described as “sometimes having information, but it is hit or miss as to whether they know things.” One participant highlighted helpful material provided by registered social landlords as a part of new tenant packs. While accessing local groups was seen as being straightforward, some participants said that accessing suppliers and larger organisations, like Social Security Scotland, was extremely difficult.

## Suggestions for improvement

### Third sector

Participants had a number of suggestions around how support could be improved. In one focus group, participants said that they would like to see more partnership working between organisations that help with fuel and food poverty. In another focus group the importance of holistic support was stressed, with one participant saying:

“It would be better if there was a more holistic approach to support, the professionals shouldn’t just focus on the presented issue (e.g. health). There may be other things going on that need tackling and then the health situation would be resolved, e.g. bad housing conditions/cold houses causing constant ill health. So get the house sorted and then the health would also be sorted. The whole person’s situation needs to be understood, not just one bit.”

Participants flagged that the third sector needs more funding, and there was a general concern amongst many participants that the third sector shouldn’t be doing the work that the government and energy suppliers should be doing. One participant stated that:

“If the government is going to rely so heavily on the third sector, at least give them funding to be able to help.”

One participant spoke specifically about their local Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB). They highlighted that there is a long waiting list to get an appointment and follow up is not good as a result of a lack of resources. There is a need for more funding so that they can hire more energy advisers.

Participants also stressed a need for greater budgeting and debt advice. Here collaboration between energy suppliers and debt advisers was emphasised, with a participant stating that energy companies need direct lines to trained debt advisers. It was felt that energy suppliers should have robust funds to write off energy debt. One participant also discussed the fact that there are no fuel vouchers available after 3.30pm on Fridays, suggesting that there should be a bank of pre-loaded pre-payment meter keys that could be given out on weekend.

### Energy market reform

Participants viewed the energy market as complex and confusing. They had a number of recommendations related to energy market reform:

- Participants in one focus group discussed how they would like to see a “genuine” social tariff
- Zonal pricing - participants felt that areas of high energy production should pay less. There was resentment and frustration amongst participants that energy, especially electricity, is so expensive when areas are surrounded by wind turbines
- Standing charges were felt to be unfair and too high
- Participants in one focus group felt that energy should be nationalised and devolved to the Scottish Government
- A participant felt that business energy should be charged fairly on a sliding scale

## Housing

Participants made various recommendations on housing. Some of these comments focused on social housing. Participants in one focus group highlighted that housing associations need more funding to bring their housing stock up to standard and retrofit with solar panels; remove storage heating and replace with air source heat pumps; insulate fully; install quality triple glazing, and sound external doors. It was stressed in this group that housing associations must fully insulate the houses where they have installed heat pumps as poorly insulated houses are unaffordable to heat by air source heat pump.

The same recommendations applied to new build housing. The importance of installing renewable systems and insulation in new build housing was stressed. New build housing was viewed by participants as being flimsy, and it was flagged in one group that some were still being built with oil or storage heating systems. Participants also flagged that while there is funding available for insulation/renewables, there is nothing for windows and doors. Windows and doors were seen as important because of the cold and windy conditions in rural and remote Scotland, especially on islands.

Participants in one focus group described experiencing issues with “overnight contractors” (contractors who come to an area specially to do a job) for retrofitting projects/heating system changes. The quality of work delivered by these contractors was seen as varying, and participants would prefer to use local contractors. One participant who had had a new oil boiler fitted had experienced more issues with it than the one it replaced:

“The mainland company are there to do a quick job and then leave again. They don’t care about anything but the money. Every job they do is about getting in and out of the property as quickly as possible, but not looking at the whole property including windows, doors, and other issues, such as roof repairs.”

It was felt by these participants that the Energy Company Obligation 4 (ECO4) especially needed better quality control. One participant who had had work done via ECO4 said that they had had to oversee the contractor and correct them on a number of occasions.

One participant had received a grant and loan from Home Energy Scotland for an Air Source Heat Pump, which they described as a massive help. They are currently

receiving **Domestic Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI)** payments, but worry that the system will be very expensive to run when these stop.

### **Renewables**

Participants in multiple focus felt that wind and solar farms should make much higher and fairer contributions to communities and to Scotland. There was a feeling that private wind developers are exploitative and purely driven by profits, offering minimum local benefit. The funding offered to local charities through wind farm community benefit funds, for example, were viewed as “paltry” compared to the vast profits made by developers.

Participants felt that the barriers to community ownership of wind developments should be removed. Communities should be empowered to build their own wind energy sources and sell to grid.

### **Other suggestions**

Participants in one focus group said that there should be one website showing all help available which is kept up to date, thereby ensuring that its not left to the third sector to continually try and keep on top of everything. Contradicting this, however, a participant in a different group flagged that all support being online was a problem, as often those that need the help most are not online.

It was also felt that islands and the most remote areas do not get enough support.

## Appendix A: focus group guide

### Background for facilitator

This document serves as a focus group guide but should be seen as flexible - something which organisations should adapt to best suit their needs. This note also provides some further information that might be useful for providing context for participants.

Organisations should consider ethical concerns around consent, confidentiality and anonymity, and risk of harm. As the SFPAP will only receive anonymised notes containing no personal details, it is not necessary to share consent forms with us, although these should be used as required.

### Background for participants

The Scottish Fuel Poverty Advisory Panel provides independent advice to Scottish Ministers on fuel poverty and scrutiny of the Scottish Government's progress towards delivering Scotland's 2040 statutory fuel poverty targets.

One of the Panel's key areas of focus is rural fuel poverty, and it is vitally important that our understanding and recommendations to the Scottish Government are informed by people experiencing fuel poverty. As such the Panel is partnering with organisations to carry out focus groups exploring the experiences of those living in fuel poverty in rural Scotland.

### What the Panel will do with the feedback from the focus groups

The Panel will produce a report which analyses the experiences of all the focus group participants. This will be published on the Panel's website in Spring 2025. The findings will be used to inform the Panel's advice and recommendations to the Scottish Ministers and Scottish Government on tackling fuel poverty.

After the report is published the Panel will get back in touch with the organisations running the workshops to give participants feedback about how their views have shaped the Panel's work and the Scottish Government's response.

### Questions for participants

#### Theme 1: rural specific drivers of fuel poverty

We are interested in the rural specific drivers of fuel poverty. In addition to the four recognised drivers of fuel poverty in Scotland as a whole (fuel prices, energy efficiency of the home, income, how energy is used in the home), Changeworks have defined rural specific drivers as:

- cold and wet climates
- high cost of living
- employment and training
- affordable housing
- ageing demographics
- limited access to support services

The following questions aim to draw out more detail on the specifics of fuel poverty in rural areas:

1. How does the climate in rural Scotland impact your energy usage?
2. For those that use them, how do you manage the cost of purchasing unregulated fuels?
3. For those that use gas and electricity, do you manage the costs of purchasing these differently?

## **Theme 2: rural fuel poverty since the COVID-19 pandemic, cost of living and energy crises**

The energy crisis began in late 2021, and caused higher household energy rates and bills for people in the UK, leaving many people struggling. This is combined with the fact that many people were already facing difficulties because of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis more generally. We are interested in how your energy usage has changed since these crises began.

4. Did your energy usage change during the COVID-19 pandemic?
5. Has your energy usage changed since the energy crisis?
6. Do you struggle with energy costs all year round or do your experiences vary seasonally?

6.1 Has this changed?

## **Theme 3: metering**

The RTS meter is a type of electricity meter that operates via long-wave radio technology. The service is a legacy industry-run service which supports versions of multi-rate, or other complex meter types with certain functions such as switching between peak and off-peak rates or turning on heating or hot water. The RTS system is now very old and relies on what is regarded as obsolete technology. The technology that supports Radio Teleswitch (RTS) meters will end on 30 June 2025. Without the technology to tell RTS meters when to switch between peak and off-peak rates they will no longer work properly.

In most cases, RTS meters (and indeed other types of meters present in rural households) should be replaced with smart meters. However, Ofgem have highlighted that the roll out of smart meters for RTS consumers has progressed at a considerably slower pace than expected. Rural areas in particular have had lower uptake of smart meters. Furthermore, access to the dedicated network connection services required for a functioning smart meter system varies widely across the UK, with notably lower accessibility outside of urban centres. In some cases even where smart meters have been installed they are not operating as such, meaning that consumers are at risk of receiving estimated or catch up bills, often without warning.

We would like to explore these issues with you:

7. What has your experience of updating or changing electricity meters been?
8. Are you aware of the RTS switch off and the implications it has for metering?

9. If you have an RTS meter, what has your experience with your supplier been like?

#### **Theme 4: support interventions**

Changeworks have highlighted that the limited number and dispersed nature of public and social services in rural areas means people are less likely or able to reach out for assistance during times of financial hardship. There is also lower uptake of welfare support in rural regions because of a lack of awareness and access to services.

We are interested in drawing out these issues further with you in order to understand what support is most useful to those living in rural areas, as well as how support can be reformed or introduced to provide the help required.

10. What energy related support have you had?
11. How was your experience in accessing this support?
12. What intervention would make the biggest difference to your life?