



Committee on Fuel Poverty

Minutes of Committee on Fuel Poverty (CFP) Meeting, 22nd August 2017

1. The Chairman and all members of the Committee were present: David Blakemore (Chair), Alice Maynard, Jenny Saunders, Paul Massara and Lawrence Slade. Representatives of Smart Energy GB attended for a discussion on smart metering. From BEIS, the Sponsor and Secretariat were present.

Minutes of last meeting and actions

2. The minutes of the meeting on 18th July were approved and were subsequently published on the CFP web pages on 1st August.

3. The majority of actions from the last meeting had been completed and members were content that remaining actions were being progressed.

Members' Interests

4. No potential conflicts of interest specific to the meeting's agenda were declared.

Smart metering

5. Claire Maugham and Alaa' Al Samarrai from Smart Metering GB (SEGB) attended to discuss progress with the smart meter roll-out, with a focus on fuel poor and vulnerable consumers.

6. Key points made included the following:

- SEGB's view was that, whilst it would not be possible to claim that smart meters could in themselves lift households out of fuel poverty, key objectives of the roll-out – such as providing accurate bills, improving pre-payment systems and helping households to feel confident about their levels of consumption so that they stay warm – were all relevant to the fuel poor.
- SEGB's commissioned research on consumers' reactions and responses to smart metering generally suggested that those on low incomes were mostly positive about smart metering. For instance, 89% of people with pay-as-you-go smart meters, many of whom may be on low incomes, would recommend them (the rate was slightly higher than the average recommendation level) and that 51% of those in fuel poverty [NB: the fuel poverty definition used is to be confirmed by SEGB], who know what a smart meter is, would seek or accept one in the next six months.

- Members discussed one of SEGB’s research findings that around 5% of consumers reported that they used more energy following their smart meter installation, rather than less, and that this could include fuel poor households. This could be taken to suggest that the provision of consumption data had given the households confidence that they could afford to spend a little more, possibly to ensure they stayed warm. Members also noted, however, that the larger numbers who had reduced their consumption could include fuel poor households who had reacted differently, and for instance may have been worried by their consumption data. In connection with this, the importance of effective consumer engagement, tailored to fuel poor and vulnerable people, was noted, particularly at installation but also beyond.
- SEGB outlined their work to reach vulnerable and harder-to-reach audiences and engage diverse communities.
- There was discussion of the opportunities that could be opened up by the availability of detailed consumption data. It was noted that access to data depended on customers agreeing to its use, but SEGB said that generally customers had been willing to give permission where there appeared to be benefits and good reasons. Possibilities included being able to provide alerts for healthcare purposes (e.g. if elderly or unwell occupants did not display their usual activity patterns), or even identifying early signs of Alzheimer’s disease. The data would also provide more information on customers who “self-disconnect” (for instance, by registering sudden, significant drops in consumption). SEGB noted that there would be further discussion of the possibilities in its forthcoming Smarter Living document, due to be published in September.

7. Overall, members were positive about the potential benefits from smart metering for the fuel poor, but highlighted the risks of some people responding to consumption data by under-consuming (and consequently not staying sufficiently warm), and the need for effective, tailored engagement with fuel poor and vulnerable consumers. Members asked if SEGB might be able to obtain more specific data on fuel poor households in future research, where possible.

Annual report

8. Members held detailed discussions on the content of their draft annual report.

Research project

9. Members noted that the research project steering group had met to evaluate the research proposals submitted by the deadline, and had taken members’ views into account in reaching its decision. Subject to budget-holder sign-off, a contractor had been selected and the project was scheduled to begin in early September.

Stakeholder engagement

10. Members reviewed recent engagement with stakeholders, and considered plans for engagement upon publication of the Committee's annual report planned for October.

Dates of future CFP Meetings

11. Dates for forthcoming meetings are:

- 11th October 2017
- 15th November 2017