



A grassroots campaign taking action against mammoth fuel bills and working towards an affordable, sustainable and democratic energy system

Email	fuelpovertyaction@gmail.com
Website	fuelpovertyaction.org.uk
Facebook	/fuelpovertyaction
Twitter	@fuelpovaction

The Rt Hon Kwasi Kwarteng, MP
Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth

3 November 2020

Dear Minister,

We are writing about the need to ensure that residents with problematic heat networks can keep warm this winter and next. We believe this requires

- a) bringing forward arrangements for compensation when district heating breaks down
- b) upgrading those networks which repeatedly fail, on an emergency basis.

We know the government is committed to heat networks as part of its heat decarbonisation strategy, and has invested significant sums to the development of new systems. We also know that in many cases this form of heating serves residents well, and that it can bring down both bills and carbon emissions. But it is well known that there are many heat networks, both old and new, that fail on both counts. Crucially, there are many that have frequent outages, and sometimes prolonged ones, where residents cannot access either heat or hot water.

In a pandemic year, this is a crisis.

As you know, residents on heat networks cannot switch energy supplier when their heating fails. As regulation of the industry is still some time away, most users are not even entitled to compensation for this loss of supply. This is in sharp contrast to compensation and alternative heating sources supplied in the case of a gas outage. A minority of district heating users, those residents on schemes that are members of the Heat Trust schemes, *can* get compensation, but even then only after a 24 hours outage. Without compensation, we find that many people cannot afford to plug in an electric heater, or to use an immersion heater for water (if they have one). Such substitute heating sources can be very expensive to run, as well as to buy..

In a normal year during a heat network outage, pensioners tell FPA that they leave home to spend a day in the library, young people shower at the local gym, mothers take the children to their grandparents for a bath or just to get warm. But in a total or partial lockdown, or when members of the family are self-isolating or shielding, these options are not available (see two examples, below). And it must be remembered that the people so affected may be ill.

In our experience many people, even when very cold, avoid running up debts that they do not know how they can repay. And of course, people on prepayment meters are often unable to postpone payment even if they choose to. If householders had confidence that their out of pocket costs would be covered, then they would be more willing and more able to use alternative fan heaters and immersion heaters, and so protect their health.

We believe compensation must be available to all, to ensure that they can afford to use alternative forms of heating. Compensation (or out of pocket expenses) is due to come in with legislation, and it is unconscionable for large parts of the heat industry to hold on to the last, and refuse in this year to cover the costs, potentially endangering lives. We have asked the Heat Industry National Council (HNIC) for leadership on this issue but they have refused -- instead suggesting that the electricity industry should pick up the tab for heat network failures. We now ask you to use your position to intervene and ensure residents' safety.

But we also appreciate that repeated payments to thousands of residents are not a lasting solution to the problem. We believe an emergency fund to prevent these constant breakdowns in a limited number of networks would fit well with the government's green recovery plans.

It is "green" because failing heat networks are not energy efficient. This is particularly true when residents are forced to turn to inefficient electric space heaters as an alternative. But even when this does not happen, poorly functioning networks do not perform the carbon-saving role that they are now being brought in to achieve.

It furthers "recovery" from Covid-19 because it protects people's health, and because the skilled work involved would quickly provide employment for significant numbers of workers, in a field which the government has been anxious to promote.

It is possible, and practical, because, as numerous studies have proved, failing networks can often be optimised with basic repairs, digital diagnostics, and improved controls. We believe government funds should be available for this, but as a loan -- commercial businesses should not expect subsidies to address their failures, but at the same time customers must not pay for these failures with their health or financial security. If necessary investment in new heat networks should take second place to fixing the disasters that are giving the whole industry a bad name.

It is an emergency because, this winter and next, lives are at stake.

We ask you to urgently consider both this proposal and the need for compensation, to ensure that, in the absence of a functioning heat network, people of all ages can keep warm.

As winter is almost upon us, we hope to hear from you very soon.

Sincerely,

Ruth London

Case histories:

Pat Edmonds, from Wyndham and Comber Tenants and Residents Association in Southwark had this question for the council in March 2020:

“One question I get asked almost daily from tenants/residents of Wyndham & Comber Estate is, “is enough work being done to safeguard the district heating?” It failed last weekend. Everyone was freezing. Lots of people have young children who they now cannot take out to their grandparents for warmth and most of whom cannot afford the cost of putting on electric fires. Many seniors are having to augment their electricity bills by paying extra money.”

Hamida Rahman, a Tower Hamlets resident wrote to her landlord, Peabody,

“In this crisis I have been forced to isolate with a three year old in a cold flat with no heating and hot water.” “Will it take a suicide for this to catch your attention and make real change?”