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Plans for Britain's first national fuel poverty helpline announced

Energy suppliers have announced that they plan to set up a national helpline for consumers who need support in managing their energy bills and keep their homes warm. The helpline is announced today by the Energy Minister, Mike O'Brien MP, and will be operational by the autumn.

The helpline will provide a single number service through which consumers who are on low income benefits will be able to speak to an energy company adviser about debt management or energy efficiency. The helpline is funded collectively by the industry and the advisers will be part of each supplier's priority service team.

There are currently over 2 million people living in fuel poverty. The Government has pledged to eliminate fuel poverty in vulnerable households by 2010. The helpline is part of the industry's contribution to reducing this number over the next three to four years.

Duncan Sedgwick, ERA chief executive, said "The primary purpose of the line will be to encourage vulnerable customers to talk to their suppliers either directly or through a third party. The helpline will be able to respond to both the specific end customer and/or third party agencies like family and friends, health workers, housing associations, local authorities, employment offices, Citizens Advice Bureaux, Age Concern, Help the Aged, other voluntary sector organisations etc.

The challenge will be encouraging vulnerable and potentially fuel poor customers and their representatives to use the helpline and have confidence that it will be of assistance to them."

Through the helpline suppliers will be able to ensure that customers on reduced incomes get free energy efficiency measures installed in their homes, such as cavity wall

insulation, loft insulation and heating systems. They will make sure that no customers who are elderly, disabled or in serious financial difficulty will be disconnected from their supply at any time of year. And they will encourage eligible customers to take advantage of free services, such as gas safety checks and meter relocation.

No other commercial sector comes close to the level of help energy companies offer low income customers. Energy suppliers have a range of schemes specifically for vulnerable and fuel poor customers, including benefits health checks, fixed and low rate tariffs, energy efficiency packages and trust funds. They have spent over £300 million during the last 3 years and will be spending over £700 million on fuel poverty programmes in the next 3 years.

Energy Minister, Mike O'Brien MP has given his full support. He said: "By the time the clocks go back in October, the new helpline will provide, for the first time, one number to help those in hardship save money through improved insulation and heating of their homes, help on managing bills and preventing debt, and we'll be working to see what other services can be provided such as benefit health checks."

Commenting on the Minister's praise for the industry initiative, Mr Sedgwick said: "We are delighted that the Minister is supporting our proposal for a helpline, but it is important to recognise that fuel poverty is not caused by energy suppliers. They can help with solutions to tackle the "fuel" element, but the causes of poverty are rooted far more deeply in social policy, such as the nation's poor housing stock, the accessibility of benefits, levels of health and the effectiveness of welfare support."

Ends

Notes for editors:

The Energy Retail Association established in October 2003 is the only dedicated trade association for UK energy suppliers. All the main energy suppliers operating in the domestic market in Great Britain are members of the new association. The ERA was set up at the instigation of the energy supply industry in order to identify areas where the industry can work together for the common good without competitive advantage. As part of its work the ERA seeks to improve the profile of the sector and represent the interests of energy retailers.

The ERA's election manifesto is available at www.energy-retail.org.uk

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