

Leeds City Council

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Continually improving efficiency in a large housing stock

Summary

Leeds City Council governs the metropolitan area of Leeds, in West Yorkshire, and is responsible for over 322,000 households, representing a population of over 715,000. Although the traditional industries of the area have declined, commercial growth has been strong and there are many prosperous areas in the city. However, while unemployment is low, there is also a growing gap between rich and poor.

The work on energy within the Council is the responsibility of the Fuelsavers team, which started in the 1980s and currently employs 13 people. Fuelsavers also operates the Energy Saving Trust Energy Efficiency Advice Centre for Leeds, Bradford and Hull covering 660,000 dwellings. In addition to this, Fuelsavers operates Npower's Health Through Warmth and Community Warmth Programmes and is heavily involved in working with the Energy Action Grants Agency in facilitating Warm Front grants to benefit recipients in the City of Leeds. The team's work, on behalf of its local authority, has focused on the domestic sector, as the large number of older buildings in Leeds presents a significant opportunity to improve energy efficiency. CO₂ savings of 88,000 tonnes/year have been achieved so far.

The Fuelsavers team contacts over 25,000 people a year on energy matters via postal surveys and through its telephone advisory staff who are integrated with the main Council call centre. Being integrated within a larger call centre allows the energy advisors to be reassigned to other call centre tasks when demand is low, and also means that people calling about other issues can be transferred to the Fuelsavers team when appropriate. Fuelsavers also carries out door-to-door visits; for example, the current Community Warmth Initiative will visit 32,000 homes in a year, focusing on the poorest wards in the city, with 7,700 households assisted to date since the scheme started in late 2007.

The Fuelsavers team gathers data on energy efficiency from households as part of its obligations under the Home Energy Conservation Act 1995, and has also acquired historical data from utility companies to give it a reliable database which it can use to target its campaigns effectively. It has also used data such as the level of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), a particular health problem exacerbated by cold conditions in the home, in different areas. This has allowed it to target programmes to improve insulation and heating for people whose health is suffering due to cold and damp conditions at home.

Fuelsavers has used a range of sources to fund its work, including Energy Efficiency Commitment money from energy suppliers (now replaced by CERT), Warm Front grants and payment from the Energy Saving Trust for running the advice centre. The Council has also used some of its own funds in upgrading the energy efficiency of its buildings, under an Invest to Save programme.

The council and area

Leeds City Council governs the metropolitan area of Leeds, in West Yorkshire, and is the second largest local authority in England. It is responsible for over 322,000 households, representing a population of over 715,000, 14% of whom belong to ethnic minority groups. The council had a budget of £2.1 billion in 2007/08, employs 35,000 staff, and has been rated 'excellent' by the audit commission.

Leeds City Council's work on energy efficiency and fuel poverty is carried out by the Fuelsavers team which currently employs 13 people. The group has a long history, having started in the 1980s as the Leeds Energy Advice Project with a focus on increasing income for those in fuel poverty. The work was extended into energy-saving measures such as insulation, and the group was absorbed into the City Council in 1989. In 1992 Fuelsavers started operation of the local Energy Efficiency Advice Centre (EEAC), which covered Leeds, Bradford and Hull, and in 2008 it will take responsibility for one of the Energy Saving Trust Advice Centres. Fuelsavers is managed by Alan Jones and his assistant Darren Adams, while Peter Simpson is responsible for the advice centre functions that Fuelsavers performs for the Energy Saving Trust.

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Context

Leeds has an industrial heritage, focused on clothing and textiles, but many of these businesses have now left and the commercial sector has been growing strongly. There are many high income jobs in banking and insurance, call centres and the service industry and also large employers. Unemployment is low, but there is a growing gap between rich and poor. Education is also important to Leeds, with 33,000 students in the universities and colleges.

In the 1980s Leeds had 300,000 homes, of which 100,000 were council owned, but the government 'right to buy' programme has resulted in 40,000 council homes being transferred to private ownership since then. There has also been significant construction of new homes, including flats built by the universities for their students to live in. The number of rented houses has increased from 4,500 in 2002 to 42,000 in 2008, which presents a challenge to tackling energy efficiency as landlords are not always keen to make improvements. Of particular concern are the 2,500 registered Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs), and a further 2,000 suspected unregistered. Many of the houses in Leeds were built before 1920 and have solid walls, making them more difficult to insulate.

Although Leeds has 322,000 homes, the Fuelsavers team is responsible for the energy efficiency of 660,000 homes because it covers Bradford and Hull as well.

Sustainable energy policy

During the time Fuelsavers has been in operation at Leeds the council policy has shifted significantly. In the 1980s the council started to see that cold and damp properties were not just the responsibility of the residents, but of the council too. They also found that money spent upgrading the energy efficiency of their housing stock resulted in savings on maintenance in future years.

With the government 'right to buy' programme shifting property out of council control, a new approach was needed to energy efficiency. The Home Energy Conservation Act 1995 (HECA) provided a legal framework which allowed Fuelsavers to survey homes and gather data on energy efficiency. Fuelsavers developed the 'Warm Homes Cool Planet' strategy in response to HECA, outlining energy efficiency measures to be adopted by the Authority in refurbishing its own housing stock, as well as measures to be encouraged and supported in the housing stock as a whole in order to produce a 30% energy efficiency improvement.

The latest policy to be put in place is the Leeds Affordable Warmth Strategy, which runs from 2007 to 2016. This emphasises the use of the Housing, Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) to take remedial action on poor heating and insulation, especially in the private rented sector. The next policy coming up for implementation is the Climate Change Strategy, which was put in place when the Leeds signed the Nottingham Declaration on Climate Change. This strategy covers the whole city, not just the council's activity, and is due to be published in mid-2008.

Sustainable energy within council buildings

Within Leeds City Council's offices and other buildings, several measures have been taken to reduce energy consumption. 120 Energy Guardians have been appointed – these are employees from all departments who have been trained in energy efficiency and are now responsible for monitoring energy use within their buildings. They are authorised to report problems with energy use which are not being addressed. The council uses the Eco-Management and Audit Scheme throughout, and all their suppliers are required to use materials from sustainable sources. Investment is also used as a tool to reduce energy use; the council has an 'Invest to Save' programme, where funds are available to replace old heating systems with new efficient versions, as the savings will repay the capital.

The benefits of these measures include reduced bills, lower CO₂ emissions and raised awareness of the importance of energy use within the council's staff.

Sustainable energy in council and private housing

The most significant aspect of the energy efficiency work in Leeds is in housing, both council-owned and private. The starting point for this work is the database on household energy use that the Fuelsavers team has built up over the years through HECA surveys, which they believe is one of the most comprehensive and accurate among all the local authorities in England. The accuracy of the database has been particularly helped by the acquisition of data from utility companies on historical energy consumption. HECA requires a 30% saving in household energy use by 2011; Leeds had achieved over 21% by 2007, and expects to hit the target on time.

Most of Leeds' council owned homes are operated by Arms Length Management Organisations (ALMOs), which are not-for-profit housing companies. In Leeds all of the ALMOs have been given targets to raise the SAP (Standard Assessment Procedure for Energy Rating of Dwellings) ratings of their housing stock. Fuelsavers gives the ALMOs quarterly feedback on their progress, and arranges grants for improvements to be made. Over the past four years Fuelsavers have been responsible for over 37,000 installations of cavity wall or loft insulation, and over 20,000 installations of efficient gas boilers through their work with ALMOs. Blocks of flats, which are hard to treat, have been tackled by installing external insulating cladding and replacing old heating systems with gas-fired CHP (Combined Heat and Power) units.

One of the main strategies Fuelsavers uses to tackle fuel poverty and improve energy efficiency is the Community Warmth Initiative, which is targeted at the five poorest wards in Leeds. Five surveyors are used to do door-to-door visits to ensure that all homes are covered and that any language problems are overcome. Each household is surveyed in a single visit for energy efficiency, fire safety and security, and the residents are offered benefits checks to see if they are not claiming any that they are entitled to. The initiative can also provide extra assistance where required, such as helping elderly residents clear their loft space in preparation for having insulation installed. 32,000 homes will be visited between November 2007 and September 2008. The

response rate so far has been 55%, but due to many homes being hard to treat, the referral rate for installations has only been 7%. The Community Warmth Initiative has been supplemented by the distribution of over 151,000 low energy light bulbs to priority and low income houses.

Leeds has several areas where there is no gas supply, and no intention by the suppliers to extend the gas network, leaving people reliant on electric heating. As these areas are also less affluent, the use of electric heating had pushed a number of households into fuel poverty. To tackle this problem, Fuelsavers arranged for an independent supplier to install a gas supply network in these areas, offering all households the option to connect to it. Council owned homes had the supply installed up to the wall, even if they chose not to connect, and efficient boilers were installed under the Authority's Heat Lease scheme. 1,500 homes were brought within reach of the gas supply, and 85% chose to connect to it.

For people whose health is being affected by lack of heating and damp conditions, Fuelsavers runs the Health Through Warmth scheme. This targets areas with high use of health services for heating and efficiency measures; over 400 households have been helped so far with the installation of insulation and efficient boilers. As a result residents have seen their bills reduced and are now better able to heat their homes, leading to improved health and reduced strain on hospital resources. To ensure that the people who need help are reached, Fuelsavers has trained 2,700 health visitors and other medical staff, and 400 new people are trained each year.

In the private rented sector Fuelsavers has issued a best practice guide for landlords which is now being enforced. The guide requires a minimum SAP 55 level, and landlords that do not comply are removed from the approved list maintained by Unipol, a student lettings organisation that protects tenants' rights and advertises properties.

As a result of Fuelsavers' work in council and private housing in Leeds, installations have resulted in an estimated CO₂ saving of over 88,000 tonnes/year. In addition to this the EEAC work has led to an estimated cumulative saving of over 150,000 tonnes of CO₂.

Sustainable energy in the community

Fuelsavers contacts 25,000 people every year on energy efficiency matters; 19,000 through postal surveys and 6,000 through its call centre. On average, each household in Leeds is contacted once every six years. The call centre is a key element of the Fuelsavers strategy; people across the city can call a freephone number to get advice on energy efficiency and find out about grants that they may qualify for. The Fuelsavers telephone team have been recruited from existing council call centre staff and trained to City and Guilds standard in Energy Awareness, so that they could give advice on energy efficiency. When demand is low they can also take other calls, so giving Fuelsavers a flexible workforce. All other staff in the call centre are aware of the presence of the Fuelsavers team, and when appropriate will ask callers about energy efficiency, and transfer them to the Fuelsavers team for further advice if they are interested.

Fuelsavers has worked to increase the effectiveness of its community outreach by involving other organisations, such as tenants groups and welfare charities. For the Health Through Warmth scheme it trains staff from public, private and voluntary organisations that are already working in the community with the target groups. For instance, 2,700 health authority staff and 1,700 care assistants have been trained. In a similar way the Low Energy Lighting Scheme used locally based groups to distribute low energy light bulbs to residents most in need of them.

Fuelsavers has also involved the local community in its role as the local EEAC, by providing displays and presentations at community events, such as a number of Older Peoples Celebration events in South East Leeds and talks on energy efficient building methods for students at the Leeds College of Building.

Management and partnerships

The work of Fuelsavers is overseen by a board, which includes members from several council departments, the benefits team, Citizens Advice Bureau, Care & Repair, Eaga, the local ALMOs, Npower, and the local Primary Care Trust.

Fuelsavers maintains partnerships with a range of public bodies, including Bradford and Hull City Councils and the Energy Saving Trust through its work as an advice centre. It also co-operates with neighbouring advice centres in South Yorkshire and Kirklees. Npower is a key partner for the Health Through Warmth scheme and EEC funding for the Community Warmth Initiative, while Powergen provides low energy light bulbs and 'Powerdown' devices, which are used to switch off peripherals when a computer is turned off.

Finance and payment

Many of the schemes Fuelsavers has run in Leeds have been funded by EEC, Warm Front and the Heatlease, and in future will be funded through the Carbon Emissions Reduction Target (CERT). Npower have been the main providers of EEC funding in Leeds. Clients of the Health Through Warmth scheme are asked to contribute to the cost of measures taken, but if they are unable to then charitable or council funds are used. Fuelsavers work that comes under their role as an advice centre is funded by the Energy Saving Trust, so that services such as home energy checks can be provided free of charge.

Upgrades to council buildings under the Invest to Save programme are funded through government grants, matched with money from the council's capital fund.

Potential for growth and replication

Fuelsavers has made significant progress in improving home energy efficiency in Leeds, but the size of the area covered by the council means that there is still much to do, particularly with pre-1920 solid-walled properties. It aims to have improved the efficiency of all council-owned housing stock by 2011, and also to continue working to educate residents and landlords about best practice for tackling hard-to-treat properties. EEACs are being superseded by Energy Saving Trust Advice Centres, and Fuelsavers will be the advice provider responsible for the Leeds metropolitan district.

Within the council's non-housing assets, there are plans to roll out advanced metering to allow the energy use in buildings to be monitored and managed more efficiently. This will enable regular feedback on energy use to building managers. When street lighting is due to be replaced, new designs based on LEDs will be used, delivering improvements in efficiency and durability, and also the option for programming the time and brightness of lighting. The Invest to Save programme will continue and it is hoped that the new Energy Guardians scheme will deliver benefits in improved efficiency and raised awareness. Fuelsavers has also commissioned a consultant to look at the feasibility of setting up Energy Service Companies (ESCOs) to bulk buy energy, resell it to domestic and business customers and invest the profits in the customers themselves.

Fuelsavers disseminates knowledge and experience through the local HECA forum, which is currently chaired by one of its staff, and also through several working groups of the Energy Efficiency Partnership for Homes, the Regional Energy Forum, and several other regional groups.

Leeds City Council and Fuelsavers have been working on domestic energy efficiency for many years, and their achievements may look daunting to a local authority that has only recently started making progress in this area. However, the legislation, partnerships and funding that Fuelsavers has used are available to any council, and it has demonstrated what is possible by working persistently to tackle fuel poverty and improve energy efficiency.

This report is based on information provided to the Ashden Awards judges by Leeds City Council, and findings from a visit by one of the judges to see their work.

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