

The doctor will see you now...



With rising fuel costs, more UK households are struggling to pay their energy bills. **Garry Campbell** thinks Green Doctors are the answer.

If heating your home burns up more than 10% of your income, then you are officially 'fuel poor' – along with an estimated four million households in the UK. Chances are, a number of alterations could be made to reduce the energy your home consumes, cutting costs at the same time. But, as you struggle to set aside the cash to pay your bills, the idea of forking out for loft insulation and draught excluders is a joke. It's not something you've done before, you don't know how much it would cost, and you're dubious of the eventual cost savings.

But what if someone – not a sales person, but an independent advisor or 'doctor' – were to come and see your home and prescribe the most effective way forward? If that service were free, would you take it up? And if the advisor were backed by the local authority and an independent environmental organisation, would you listen?

That's the solution that Groundwork is pioneering in collaboration with local authorities in Leeds, Leicester, north London and Slough. So far, its Green Doctor scheme has brought energy-saving specialists into over 1,200 households, offering free, personalised advice.

As Claire Pratley, Climate Change Team Leader at Groundwork Leeds, explains, "the service targets the most vulnerable: the elderly, the disabled, those in low-income households..."



people for whom saving money is a real imperative".

"For many of them," she adds, "the value of saving carbon is hard to grasp. But when they see the money coming off their fuel bills, the benefit of energy efficiency is clear."

One of the areas most affected in England is the Yorkshire and Humber region, with 163,000 households in fuel poverty. In Leeds, West Yorkshire, demand for the Green Doctor has rocketed since the service began in 2007. Groundwork estimates that the scheme has helped vulnerable residents in Leeds save over £300,000 – an average of £110 per family.

One of the householders involved, Nicky Ramsden, said: "Reflective radiator panels are now bouncing the heat back into our house when the radiators are on – and we're also saving money on electricity".

But, according to Emma Rooney, Green Doctor Project Coordinator in Leeds, raising energy efficiency standards is only one aspect of the scheme. "We don't just visit homes to hand out light bulbs and loft insulation, although that's obviously important. Like any other doctor, we offer the 'patient' advice on staying fit and healthy, and point them towards other local community support agencies."

While other organisations also offer advice, Rooney thinks that Groundwork's personalised approach is more likely to encourage people to take the first steps. "There's no substitute for somebody sitting down with you in your home," she says. "When someone you feel safe with takes the time to listen to your concerns, and then explains what you can do to be more comfortable and save money – you listen."

Groundwork hopes to train more people to be Green Doctors, extending the service to other parts of the country. ☺

Garry Campbell works for Groundwork UK.

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