



PRESS RELEASE
Immediate release 10th February 2005

Energy companies must do more to protect children living in poverty

Children in Scotland, the national agency for all those working for children and their families, today urged energy companies to take action to stop fuel disconnections in households where there are children.

It is recognised that pensioners are a vulnerable group but families with children are as likely to be affected by fuel debt and therefore disconnection.

In a report published today (Thursday, February 10), the House of Commons Trade and Industry Committee expressed concern over energy companies' definition of vulnerability and whether staff are able to identify those who are most vulnerable. It also acknowledged that spending time and effort in identifying vulnerable customers is "absurd" if the customer changes supplier and the protection is lost. It urged companies "as a matter of urgency" to seek clarification from the Information Commissioner about whether the Data Protection Act prevents the transfer of this information.

Eddie Follan, policy development manager at Children in Scotland, said: "As this report highlights, people from poorer areas are disproportionately likely to have their fuel disconnected for debt. The reasons for becoming indebted are often a sudden drop in income caused by job loss, family break-up or illness. It is families who are more likely to be affected by these situations and the children involved have no choice.

"It is not just disconnections that cause problems, the threat of disconnection is also an issue. Faced with the threat, some families will cut back on essentials such as food in order to pay the bill.

"Recent figures from the Scottish House Condition Survey 2002 show that one in seven households in Scotland live in fuel poverty, unable to afford adequate warmth in the home. In over ten per cent of these households – 30,000 – there are children.

“The consequences of fuel poverty are misery, discomfort, ill-health and debt. For children there can also be reduced life chances. Living in a cold, damp environment can exacerbate health problems such as asthma and heart conditions. It also affects children’s education. Often people struggling to pay their energy bills ration their use of fuel by, for example, just heating one room or making the choice between cooking a hot meal and turning on a heater.

“We would urge energy companies to respond positively to this report to stop disconnections to households where there are children and do more to support those families who are struggling to pay their energy bills.”

1. The report: *Debt and Disconnection: Gas and electricity supply companies and their domestic customers Fifth Report of Session 2004–05* from the House of Commons Trade and Industry Committee. The report is attached.
2. The issue will be addressed at a fringe meeting *Children, families and fuel poverty* at the Labour Party conference at the Hilton Hotel, Dundee at 5:30pm on Friday, March 4.
3. Children in Scotland is the national agency for voluntary, statutory and professional organisations and individuals working with children and their families in Scotland. It exists to identify and promote the interests of children and their families and to ensure that relevant policies, services and provisions are of the best possible quality and able to meet the needs of a diverse society.
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