

69) HEATING OUR HOMES - The latest in a series of articles by Iain Gregory of Caithness CAB

One night I arrived at a lonely mountain bothy in a heavy snowstorm. It was just a touch chilly and the electric water pump refused to start. It turned out that the water feed came from a nearby burn and the inlet hose was frozen solid under a couple of inches of ice. I was accompanied by a Social Worker who unhelpfully thought counselling the pump might work, whilst I preferred the idea of taking a sledgehammer to it, but eventually I lay face down in the snow, broke the ice (literally) and fiddled about underwater until the accursed inlet cleared. A peat fire and a spot of (purely medicinal) internal warming courtesy of Old Pulteney made me feel much better.

As winter approaches heating our home becomes ever more vital and the other day someone happened to mention to us that an article on this subject would be valuable. This is good timing because I have just had a meeting with Jamie Stone, MP, who has raised a debate in Westminster on the subject of "consumer protections for new central heating installations". This is something which needs to be addressed – there are schemes available to help certain people with the cost of replacing boilers and fitting insulation, but their scope is limited and great caution is needed, with numerous problems landing with CCAB or the MP, invariably involving firms based hundreds of miles away. The conclusion of the meeting was that we need tight regulation and inspection by skilled – locally based – heating engineers before any money is handed over. If you are interested in energy assistance eligibility then please do your research first and speak to Home Energy Scotland <http://www.energysavingtrust.org.uk/scotland/home-energy-scotland> 0808 808 2282 or just phone CCAB and - as always - beware of cold callers.

And here is a nasty statistic – we have a new CAS report which states that, according to official figures, 26.5% of all Scots are in fuel poverty whilst those dependent on electricity (often social housing tenants with no choice) is an astonishing 51%. The figure for gas users is 23%. And in the 1950's we were assured that in return for plonking dams all over the Highlands we could look forward to low cost electricity for ever. The truth is that we need a whole new approach to energy policy, but this will take both time and political impetus, so in the meantime what can we do?

Well, as always, shop around for your energy. Deals are there and savings can be made. If you are on benefits or a low income then ask your supplier or CCAB about the "Warm home Discount" (usually £140 per year) and if you have fuel debt then please speak to us. There are schemes about which can sometimes help and we will advise you. If you are a pensioner (born before 5th November 1953) then make sure you are getting your Winter Fuel Payment (between £100 and £300). Many of us in Caithness live "off the grid" and are dependent on oil or solid fuel and that can cause further issues because we need to buy our supplies in bulk. Personally I watch the oil price carefully and buy when it is as low as possible and try and stock up on logs and coal the same way.

There are no easy answers, but rest assured that CCAB will continue to agitate and press for change