

A Day in the Life of an Energy Champion.

Sam Bailey – Transition Town Worthing CIC – Community Energy South

Wednesday, 10.00-15.30 is the day we hold our drop-in energy advice clinic in St Paul's Arts Centre in the centre of Worthing, a former church, and one of Worthing's most iconic buildings, now serving as a gallery, performance venue, café, bar, and general community hub and meeting place.

The clinic is open to all, and we see a diverse group of clients. Many have learned about the advice clinic through their interest in Transition Town Worthing and living more sustainably, and so come for advice on reducing usage, and switching to green suppliers. Many have learned about the clinic through the outreach work we do, linking with organisations and groups supporting vulnerable people who may be in or at risk of fuel poverty, people who can benefit significantly from support with reducing energy bills, accessing further assistance and keeping warm affordably.

Although the population of Worthing is changing, the older demographic is still well represented and as such, pensioners make up a significant portion of our clientele.

As people get older, keeping warm becomes even more important. Persistent cold can cause or exacerbate a range of health problems, and the elderly, along with young infants, are particularly susceptible to this. Elderly people are likely to have existing health conditions, may be on a low income, and may not have access to the internet or feel comfortable managing an energy account online, preferring paper bills. Additionally, bereavement is a common issue, often it is the spouse who has passed who handled all the household bills, explaining little about this to the surviving spouse before passing. Resistance to switching, and also to smart meters is high among the elderly demographic.

As is the case across much of the UK, a lot of the housing stock in Worthing is sub-standard, with an estimated 7000 dwellings with an EPC rating of E or below. Old draughty windows facing coastal winds being a common problem here, as well as damp in many properties. It is estimated that 4000 households in Worthing are in fuel poverty, so there is much work to be done to alleviate the financial and environmental burden of these statistics.

Between seeing clients, today I'm writing funding bids and newsletter articles. Applications for the next Big Energy Saving Network are now open, and we're also working on funding our next Eco Open Houses trail planned for April 2020, showcasing adaptations local residents have made to their homes and to their lifestyles in order to reduce their impact on the environment. St Paul's is busy today with the weekly Little Treasures craft market here also, TTW stalwart Rod Thick has been helping me on the energy desk, talking to visitors, and passers-by have expressed their intent to bring their energy bills for advice.

Today I saw Mrs C again, Mrs C was the first person I ever helped to switch, four years ago when I had just started volunteering with Transition Town Worthing. Mrs C has been returning for advice every time her tariff comes up for renewal, and I've also helped many of her friends and neighbours.

Having recently switched again with my help a couple of weeks ago, Mrs C was having difficulty accessing her online account with the new supplier. This was rectified via an online chat conversation with a customer service agent and Mrs C is now all set with her new energy tariff, with access to the online account to view bills and submit meter readings.

Mr V first came to see me confused as to why his electricity bills were so high, as the consumption he was being billed for by British Gas didn't match with his readings. Further investigation revealed a problem I've encountered only twice before, once being with Transition Town Worthing's old office. The wrong meter was registered to Mr V's address on the database held by UK Power Networks, and he was being billed for a neighbour's electricity. This was rectified and British Gas re-calculated Mr V's account. In the meantime, we switched away from the expensive standard variable tariff to Ebico's Zero tariff, with no exit fee and no standing charge. With the correct meter being read, and no standing charge, Mr V is now being billed fairly for the electricity he uses, and we now have a more accurate picture of his annual consumption. I've presented Mr V with a number of options for his consideration, including cheapest, best rated, paper billing, fixed, exit fee free, and green options.

Tonight we have a board meeting, our directors are voluntary and therefore have day jobs and other responsibilities, as such meetings are late evenings. As a voluntary director of Transition Town Worthing CIC myself, in addition to being a paid Energy Champion, it's going to be a long day for me and the rest of TTW's directors.

Sam Bailey

