

## **Summary of benefit entitlement checks workshop - 18 October 2005 at Ofgem**

### **Overview:**

The objective of the workshop was to consider the findings of Ofgem's recent Corporate Social Responsibility report and the recent review by NEA 'Maximising Household Income' which highlighted the potential of benefit entitlement checks (BECs) if adequate support is given through the application process. Through discussion it was hoped to share best practice in this area.

After several presentations and an informed discussion, Dave Barnes summarised the key points of the workshop:

- There are many organisations doing BECs and several approaches to targeting BECs be it face to face or over the phone. All these approaches complement each other and help in alleviating fuel poverty. Ofgem is supportive of them all.
- By working together to share resources and expertise, industry and consumer organisations and government can try to reach more customers as effectively as possible
- The contribution of the ERA helpline, sharing best practice and monitoring of take-up will also help increase the level of BECs carried out.
- Ofgem will continue to encourage suppliers to work with other organisations and continue their good work in this area.
- In six months time Ofgem may hold another workshop to discuss how things have developed and see how well the ERA helpline has worked during the winter months.
- The Energy Efficiency Partnership for Homes research commencing shortly into benefits and energy efficiency advice will hopefully offer further insight in this area.

### **Features of workshop**

Over 20 delegates attended this workshop. The delegates included representatives of suppliers, energywatch, DEFRA, DTI, DWP, ERA, and consumer groups.

Dave Barnes opened the workshop with some key points about BECs

- All 6 suppliers have at some point carried out BECs (either in-house or referred customers to a 3<sup>rd</sup> party). Most of the suppliers target customers that are on/or may be eligible for certain schemes or tariffs. 4 out of the 6 suppliers have used Eaga to carry out BECs, 2 suppliers do BECs in-house.
- Currently suppliers do not systematically monitor take-up of benefits following a BEC.
- But 3 of the big 6 suppliers are considering monitoring and following up customers offered/referred for a BEC and take up of benefits identified through the BEC.

- Eaga has a system now in place to electronically refer customers eligible for Pension Credit direct to DWP.

The first half of the workshop was made up of 4 presentations:

- Citizens Advice Bureaux (CAB): gave background on the services it provides and their view on how fuel poverty can be tackled - such as partnership with voluntary organisations and a more holistic approach to BECs
- British Gas: outlined its process for BECs, when and how they carry them out and the importance of BECs in tackling fuel poverty
- NEA: summarised its research into maximising household income and set out key discussion questions – which were home visits and ongoing claim assistance should be available when requested and benefit advice should be more widely and positively promoted.
- Eaga: outlined its process for carrying out BECs and the headline figures from their statistics which monitor customer satisfaction.

These were followed with brief talks by:

- The ERA outlining the Home Heat helpline which is being launched on 31 October 2005. The helpline will pass customers or intermediaries to the correct supplier as well as give basic advice,
- DWP outlining how it is working with Eaga and willing to work with others to get referrals for Pension Credit, and;
- Energy Efficiency Partnership for Homes outlining the research project it is undertaking into combining energy efficiency and benefits advice.

Following this there was a general discussion. The key points were:

- A holistic approach is needed to reach all customers in need.
- There was recognition that there was no one department or organisation responsible for BECs. Therefore everyone has a role to play.
- The DWP scheme for referral is an exemplar of a way forward. It is worth focusing efforts here.
- Work could be done to improve the links between suppliers and consumer organisations to improve the hand over to aid customers through the process.
- Links with social services and voluntary organisations such as the Salvation Army could also be improved as they may be able to identify customers who are most in need.
- There is room and a need for different models of doing BECs, such as face to face, via the phone or through Warm Zones which target specific geographic areas and the advisor undertakes a BEC if necessary.
- Monitoring is important to identify if the methods are successful and if BECs are helping to maximise customers incomes and in combating fuel poverty.