

NEWCASTLE BOROUGH RESIDENTS SET TO FEEL WARM ZONE BENEFITS

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Householders in Newcastle-under-Lyme could soon literally be feeling the benefits of a multi-million pound project aimed at tackling fuel poverty and improving energy efficiency.

The North Staffordshire Warm Zone initiative is set to identify families eligible to receive additional payments, by carrying out simple benefits checks on their behalf.

Even a few extra pounds each week could be enough to raise many households above the 'fuel poverty' threshold that the project is targeting. Already, a number of Stoke-on-Trent residents have been found eligible for benefits since the scheme's January launch.

A spokesman for Warm Zone, a not-for-profit limited company run by the charity National Energy Action, said: "The benefits checks are something that other commercially-based companies do not offer people, but which could nevertheless make a real difference to people struggling to pay their fuel bills."

Starting in Cross Heath this month, the project is focusing on around 17,250 homes in the Borough's 11 most deprived ward areas over a two-year period.

Any households found to qualify after assessment could also be entitled to free or subsidised energy-saving work, including cavity wall insulation and loft insulation.

Funding for the North Staffordshire-wide project includes contributions from Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council, Stoke-on-Trent City Council, the National Grid Affordable Warmth Programme and Scottish Power, through the government's Energy Efficiency Commitment initiative.

It is estimated that as many as 35% of households in a given area usually qualify for free insulation measures.

People in receipt of qualifying benefits, such as tax credit, income support, pension credit, Disability Living Allowance, Attendance Allowance and those classed as 'fuel poor' - who spend more than 10% of their disposable income on household fuel - will be in the front line for energy efficiency help.

Council Leader Simon Tagg said: "Fuel poverty is a major issue for areas of our Borough and North Staffordshire as a whole, and the Warm Zone initiative will go some way towards tackling this."