

Reference number R8-FBF-P2-01 Fuel Bank Foundation

Background Information

1. **Please provide a brief overview of the history, legal status, aims and funding of your organisation.**

Fuel Bank Foundation is a Charitable Incorporated Organisation registered in England (1175049) and Scotland (SCO488330).

The charity was established in 2017, following a trial of the concept of Fuel Bank by the energy company npower, to address fuel crisis. Fuel crisis occurs when people who need to prepay for energy have no money to pay and therefore lose access to the fuel to heat homes, hot water, light, hot food, charge phones, access the internet.

We aim to tackle poverty with specific focus on responsive solutions to fuel crisis and fuel poverty; to get people reconnected to energy in the short term, as well as looking at longer term solutions to crisis issues. To work in partnership to develop sustainable solutions to the problems presented by fuel crisis and contributing factors such as fuel poverty and income crisis.

Crisis support aims to provide:

- a breathing space to access/ implement routes out of crisis
- sign posting to avenues of further self-help,
- raising awareness with policy makers and working in partnership to develop sustainable solutions to the problems presented by fuel crisis, and the contributing factors such as fuel poverty and income crisis

Our approach is first to understand the problem, then to fund innovative ideas to address unmet needs and campaign for change - taking a system wide perspective and working with all sectors of society.

We are funded from a variety of sources including government, corporate grants, charity grants, self-funded partners, and public donations.

2. **Please provide a brief description of the groups/individuals which your**

organisation supports or represents, including your network of partners and end users.

We deliver our service through a range of partners across the UK, representing the trusted community places and organisations that people turn to when in crisis. Across Scotland, at the time of the pandemic, we had 26 partners, we now partner with over 210 organisations, from local foodbanks and community hubs to specialist advice and support agencies, local authorities, housing groups and 12 GB/UK groups delivering services in Scotland. Each organisation that joins us receives training about Fuel Bank, the principles and requirements for people receiving support and the structure and process in place to ensure help goes to those who need it most, and to prevent misuse of the service, such as over-reliance on receiving vouchers, or attempting to obtain additional vouchers from same partner or through approaching multiple partners for the same help.

Role of your organisation during the COVID-19 pandemic

3. Please provide an overview of the role of your organisation during the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland.

The role and delivery of Fuel Bank continued and expanded during the pandemic, maintaining the service and support provided to our Partners. The means to do this were inherent in our working model that was not impacted by the need to change to remote working; the Fuel Bank portal continued to provide partners with a secure means to issue fuel crisis help, with the checks to prevent abuse of the fuel voucher provision maintained. Our target operating model was one of a small central team with a network typically of community-based partners based in the places where people who need help were already approaching.

The demand for help grew rapidly, we were able to respond to requests to join our partner network across Scotland in large part due to the financial support provided by the Scottish Government. Whilst some partners were able to bring their own funding, for many small, local organisations the only means of providing this much needed help was the funding provided by Scottish Government.

All funding received from partners is covered by a Grant agreement with the organisation, that specifies how funding is to be used. The Scottish Government funding was only used for organisations in Scotland that were without funding, or with only small amounts of funding available.

Impact of COVID-19 pandemic

It may be helpful, when considering the following questions, to consider the Inquiry's Terms of Reference 2(j) ("ToR 2(j)") and 2(l) ("ToR 2(l)"), which are

as follows:

ToR 2 (j) defined as: “welfare assistance programmes, for example those relating to benefits or the provision of food, provided or supported by public agencies”.

ToR 2(l) “financial support and guidance given to businesses and the self-employed, including in relation to identification of key workers, by public agencies”.

NB: This does not apply in relation to the work carried out by Fuel Bank Foundation

4. **In relation to the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland, please provide details of any financial support received by your organisation, from the Scottish Government or other public agencies, for services to be delivered by your organisation. It would also be helpful if you could provide a list of all relevant funds applied for and/or received, as well as any funds applied for but not received.**

Covid-19 Support Funding from Scottish Government			
20/21	04/06/2020	BACS SCOTTISH GOVT	£250,000.00
	11/03/2021	BACS SCOTTISH GOVT	£626,500.00

No other funding directly related to Scotland was applied for.

Where funds were received from partners in receipt of grants for COVID 19 support, these were spent on provision of Fuel Bank to their clients, prior to accessing further funds available if needed.

5. **In relation to the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland, please provide details of any financial support or guidance received by your organisation, from the Scottish Government or other public agencies, for the business, administration and operations of your organisation. It would also be helpful if you could provide a list of all relevant funds applied for and/or received, as well as any funds applied for but not received.**

Financial support for the administration and delivery of Fuel Bank was built into the funding received and covered by the Grant Agreement with the Scottish Government. A small contribution was provided to cover the costs of operating as a charity – providing central services that were needed for delivery to happen such as finance & governance.

6. In relation to the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland, please provide details of any guidance received by your organisation, from the Scottish Government or other public agencies, in relation to the identification of key workers. If applicable, please additionally provide details of any key issues and impacts (whether financial or otherwise) experienced as a result of key worker status (or a lack of key worker status, as the case may be).

This scheme was not targeted at key workers.

7. What, if any, were the key issues and impacts experienced by the groups/individuals represented by your organisation as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland and the response by the Scottish Government or other public agencies, specifically in relation to the allocation and delivery of financial welfare support, including (without limitation) support for:

vi. Fuel poverty:

Whilst fuel poverty is the entry category for fuel crisis support, all categories listed are potential recipients of Fuel Bank Support.

COVID-19 caused a rapid escalation in demand for help as people were increasingly challenged socially and financially by the impact of the pandemic:

- Loss of income from being unable to work because of lockdown, including jobs lost as businesses closed for good, or where furlough payments didn't fully cover previous pre-Covid monthly salaries.
- Cost of running the home increased because of family being at home all day, including costs of working from home, children being schooled at home, both requiring access to the Internet for electronic devices and heating and light in colder weather
- People living off -grid and relying on bulk delivery of fuel for heating, hot water and sometimes cooking, experienced an increase in the challenge of finding payment in advance, for example £500 to top up an oil or propane tank, £200 plus for a bunker of coal, or a delivery of gas bottles. The coping mechanisms of prepayment – topping up small amounts at a time, are not an option in this scenario.

Funding from the Scottish Government enabled us to extend the network of support across Scotland particularly in rural, remote and island communities where the challenge of both keeping warm in cold weather and accessing mainstream utilities is very much greater and therefore living costs & heating costs potentially much higher, being subject to market conditions and resulting in prices fluctuating.

The impact of the pandemic on Fuel Bank was a rapidly escalating demand from existing and new partners, who were helping people deal with crisis including fuel poverty. Prior to Covid -19 people supported tended to be at the edges of society and who were less visible, but most impacted by a change of social or economic environment. With Covid-19, work was reduced or cut off altogether resulting in a sudden drop in income, bringing challenges meeting existing expenses as well as the subsequent increased costs from trying to maintain education at home, find work or work from home. This was rapidly followed by an increased demand from people to become partners of Fuel Bank primarily because it was addressing an issue for which there had been very low visibility prior to the pandemic but was now becoming mainstream and the cause and impact becoming better understood,

8. What, if any, were the key issues and impacts experienced by the groups/individuals represented by your organisation as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland and the response by the Scottish Government or other public agencies, specifically in relation to measures to protect and promote welfare and wellbeing during the pandemic?

Lack of access to fuel impacts many of the key issues referenced and have already been touched on, for example access to energy is a prerequisite for charging mobile phones and access to the internet to enable and support:

- i. Social inclusion
- ii. Digital inclusion
- iii. Debt enforcement suspension may require access to mobile phone/internet to respond to communication
- iv. Self -isolation/lockdown support
- viii. Pandemic information
- ix. Help and advice

It supports all other activities in an indirect way.

It is worth noting that Food Support activity often signposts potential fuel crisis when recipients ask for cold parcels- food that doesn't need cooking.

9. What, if any, were the key issues and impacts experienced by your organisation as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland, specifically in relation to welfare assistance programmes and/or financial matters?

From a financial perspective, funding was key to our ability to respond to the rapidly increasing demand. The funding from Scottish Government was vital in delivering

assistance to people struggling to cope with the economic pressures of running a home during the pandemic.

This funding provided nearly 13,000 fuel vouchers, helping 29,370 people, of which around 30 % were children. In addition, 50 families were provided with oil, gas or other bulk heating fuels.

10. In relation to questions (4), (5), (6), (7), (8) and (9) above, you may additionally wish to consider the following:

- a. **Administrative burdens**
- b. **Accessibility of support**
- c. **Information quality; and**
- d. **Areas of absences of support.**

There wasn't a notable difference for Scotland, compared to the rest of the UK, in terms of increased consumer demand, and partner desire to work with us as COVID ramped up. The Scottish Government's response, however, was different, and support during COVID enabled us to expand our network and to offer support to families in Scotland that we could not deliver elsewhere. As a legacy of this, around 30% of the people we help today are in Scotland, which whilst disproportionate to the size of the population, reflects the scale of need that continues.

Relevant documents

11. If applicable, please provide an itemised list, together with copies, of any surveys undertaken by your organisation in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland, together with copies of the returns thereto, insofar as this relates to welfare assistance programmes and/or financial matters.

We undertake annual qualitative research across the UK on fuel voucher and heat fund recipients, to measure the impact of fuel crisis support. The latest questionnaire and guidance to interviewers is attached. This is presented in the annual Fuel Crisis report, the latest version is attached and is available through our website.

12. Please provide a list, together with copies, of any articles or reports that your organisation, or the groups/individuals they support or represent, have published or contributed to, and/or a list, together with copies, of any written or oral evidence they have previously given to anybody (for example to Scottish Parliamentary

Select Committees), regarding the impact on the groups/individuals they support or represent, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland and the response by the Scottish Government, insofar as this relates to welfare assistance programmes and/or financial matters.

The circumstances at the time necessitated a relationship with the Scottish Government that was dynamic & immediate, driven frequently by newly identified issues and bringing flexibility to the ability to respond to the pressure of the rapidly changing circumstances of a national and global pandemic.

As a result, updates were provided verbally rather than in writing, addressing progress in identifying and delivering fuel crisis support, potential issues in relation to the increasing impact of Covid-19, the challenges to identifying and delivering support that addressed specific needs presented by marginalised groups, such as GRT.

Crisis reports were published in Jan 2021 and 2022, relating to research on help in the years 2020-21, and 2021-22. Copies are attached.