

ELECTRICAL SAFETY FIRST: IMPROVING ELECTRICAL SAFETY AND PREVENTING FIRES IN WALES

CONTENTS

01.	EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
02.	RECOMMENDATIONS	4
03.	CONTEXT OF ESF'S POLICY AND LOBBYING WORK IN WALES	6
04.	PUTTING THE RECOMMENDATIONS INTO PRACTICE – TRAINING AND FUNDING ISSUES	8
05.	HOUSING IN SOUTH WALES	9
06.	GRANTS FOR ELECTRICAL SAFETY IN WALES	11
07.	CARE & REPAIR AUTHORITIES GRANT FUNDING - CASE STUDY	12
08.	SOUTH WALES FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE – WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP	15
09.	ESF CONCLUSION & DISCUSSION POINTS	16
10.	ANNEXES	18

Electrical Safety First

London Office

45 Great Guildford Street
London SE1 0ES

Telephone: +44(0)203 463 5100

Email: enquiries@electricalsafetyfirst.org.uk

01.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In July 2018, the Welsh Government produced a report entitled: *Electrical Fires in Wales: A Review of the Evidence*ⁱ, which Electrical Safety First (ESF) welcomed as a step forward in ascertaining which electrical sources of ignition remain at higher levels in Wales, and in particular the South Wales Fire and Rescue Service area. This paper documents ESF's response and discusses resulting policy issues which will focus our work with stakeholders in Wales.

The Welsh Government report identifies the overall number of accidental dwelling fires in Wales is in sustained decline, but fires with an electrical distribution source have continued to rise in the last 15 years. The South Wales Fire and Rescue Service area has had the greatest increaseⁱⁱ. The Government goes on to suggest that they found that the increase relates to electrical distribution fires rather than electrical appliances or mobile devices. Furthermore, the Government was unable to identify the cause of the increasesⁱⁱⁱ.

Whilst ESF welcomed the Government's willingness to undertake this review, we believe that the research to date raises additional questions and highlights the fact that further safety awareness work and better systems may need to be put in place to protect the Welsh public^{iv}.

ESF remains concerned about electrical safety in Wales and the fires caused by electrical distribution. We believe that the recommendations found in the Government's report need to be fully funded, workable and adaptable to ensure fires are reduced through a national strategy involving the Fire and Rescue Authorities in Wales.

ESF believes more research needs to be undertaken into electrical distribution fires in South Wales due to the age of the housing stock, particularly in the South Wales valleys area. The potential age of installations is of particular interest; however there is a lack of data available to support this theory as the Incident Reporting System does not record age of properties.

Consideration of the age of housing is supported by anecdotal evidence that ESF has obtained during various outreach events in South Wales and in our discussions with stakeholders, whereby homeowners report problems to the Charity about the age of electrical installations and their inability to afford electrical improvements or repairs. There do not appear to be any systems in place or sustainable funding mechanisms to assist the most vulnerable Welsh homeowners who have been identified as needing electrical improvements in their homes. This potentially undermines the Welsh Government's recommendation to reduce fires caused by electrical sources of ignition.

This document focusses on the South Wales Fire and Rescue Service region, its older housing stock and the proactive work being undertaken by stakeholders to reduce fires. It also looks at the policy problems that need addressing to protect the Welsh public in their homes.

i <https://gweddill.gov.wales/docs/dsjlg/publications/fire/180716-electrical-fires-in-wales-en.pdf>

ii Ibid p6

iii Ibid p2

iv <https://gov.wales/newsroom/people-and-communities/2018/new-report-on-electrical-fires-released/?lang=en>

02.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Communicating with the Welsh Public

- 2.1 The Welsh Government should help co-ordinate a campaign on electrical safety, supported by Welsh FRAs and the Charity, following the example of the Home Office's 'Fire Kills' initiative. **We would recommend a specific week of activities, similar to 'Electrical Fire Safety Week' but dedicated to Wales.**
- 2.2 **National media advertising on electrical dangers, such as the straight-forward campaign undertaken by the Home Office recently, needs to be put in place by Welsh Government^v.** Other Welsh Government national advertising on smoking, organ donation and childcare already exists in Wales, but there still exists a strong need for a co-ordinated approach on electrical dangers, led by the Welsh Government.
- 2.3 On a local level, the Charity will work in partnership with South Wales Fire and Rescue Service to reduce fires caused by electricity, by raising awareness through supporting subject-based campaigns (i.e. white goods safety) joint communications, research initiatives and appropriate outreach events.
- 2.4 The Charity will continue to build new relationships with North, Mid and West Wales Fire Services, supporting their communications work on electrical safety issues and prevention of fires.

POLICY IMPROVEMENTS

- 2.5 **Welsh Government should provide a specific grant to improve electrical safety in South Wales for the most vulnerable owner-occupiers who cannot afford electrical safety improvements that have been identified as part of a Fire and Rescue Service Home Safety Visit. The Charity will help provide ring-fenced funding through its 'Fire Safety Fund' for use in the South Wales FRS area to improve the electrical safety of owner-occupiers in most need.** A pilot area with the greatest need for improvements in domestic electrical safety could be chosen. Whilst electrical distribution has been identified in South Wales as a key source of electrical fires, there needs to be a combined approach to reducing electrical fires in Wales through the work of the Charity, Welsh Government, South Wales Fire and Rescue Service and Care & Repair Cymru.
- 2.6 **Electrical safety checks should be provided for all Welsh households with a person over the age of 80.** The cost of this initiative would be £5m maximum per year, as detailed in our Swansea University report^{vi}.

^v <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-campaign-warns-it-only-takes-one-accident-to-start-a-fire>

^{vi} <https://www.electricalsafetyfirst.org.uk/media-centre/press-releases/2017/11/older-people-in-wales-are-more-at-risk-of-electrical-fires-and-accidents/>

PARTNERSHIPS

- 2.7 **The Charity will work with the Welsh Government and FRAs to ensure that electrical safety problems are identified and referrals are actioned in order to support the Government's recommendations.** At present, it is understood that identified electrical safety issues are not always referred correctly and if they are, budgets may not allow improvements to be made. With an improved grant scheme, better guidance needs to be drafted.
- 2.8 **The Charity will help train Fire Officers to improve their electrical safety knowledge in the South Wales Fire and Rescue Service area.** Whilst the Welsh Government has rightly identified that Fire Officers are not electricians, basic awareness of electrical hazards and improving data capture are essential.

IMPROVED DATA CAPTURE AND RESEARCH

- 2.9 The Charity believes that, whilst the Welsh Government's analysis correctly identifies electrical distribution as a problem in South Wales, we should not neglect other issues. These include the misuse of electricity, product safety failures, the increased number of appliances in homes, and increased charging of products, often combined with older housing stock and wiring. **More research needs to be undertaken to fully understand the wider issues with electrical use in South Wales. We will aim to work with South Wales Fire and Rescue Service on potential research and future-proofing of data.**
- 2.10 There is a potential, given the age of properties in South Wales that homeowners could be living in properties ill-equipped to deal with modern living. **A lack of hard data makes this issue difficult to accurately determine which properties and people are at risk of fires caused by electricity and we would encourage further policy research between the Charity and the Welsh Government, to allow for informed Government and stakeholder-led consumer awareness campaigns.**
- 2.11 It is unknown how many properties in Wales may need a re-wire, or have unsafe electrical installations, as data from Statistics Wales does not provide sufficient information. **Consideration should be given to surveying South Wales properties to determine the extent of the problem.**
- 2.12 **Welsh Government should report annually to the Senedd on electrical safety policy across Wales and progress being made to reduce electrical fires in Wales.**

03.

CONTEXT OF ESF'S POLICY AND LOBBYING WORK IN WALES

- 3.1 Since 2016, there have been three main issues of concern in Wales for the Charity, around which we have concentrated our discussions with Members of the National Assembly for Wales (AMs) and the Welsh Government, these are:
 - Fires caused by electrical distribution, misuse of appliances and lack of information on fires caused by electrical items that require charging.
 - Safety of tenants who live in the private and social rented sectors.
 - The sale of electrical goods (counterfeit, substandard and second-hand) to Welsh citizens, often online, which can be unsafe or illegal. (*The latter being a matter for the UK Government*).
- 3.2 The Charity has made progress in improving consumer protection in Wales for people living in the private and social rented sectors. But a continuing key priority is the need to understand why more fires are caused by electrical sources of ignition in Wales than anywhere else in the UK.
- 3.3 Our lobbying during the passage of the Renting Homes (Wales) Bill, (now the Renting Homes (Wales) Act), saw the Welsh Government acknowledge the need to protect tenants in Wales by stating its intention to introduce mandatory electrical safety checks in the private and social rented sectors. Previously, the Welsh Government rejected the need for further regulation of the respective sectors. This policy will have a significant impact on protecting people living in those sectors from electrical accidents and fires.
- 3.4 Discussions led by the Charity and lobbying by Assembly Members resulted in the Welsh Government agreeing to look in closer detail at fires caused by electricity in Welsh homes. This led to significant research and consequent publication of the report by the Welsh Government, '*Electrical Fires in Wales – A Review of Evidence*^{vii}'.

vii <https://gweddill.gov.wales/docs/dsjlg/publications/fire/180716-electrical-fires-in-wales-en.pdf>

PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR IN WALES – POLICY PROGRESS

- 3.5 During the passage of the Renting Homes (Wales) Bill the Charity was able to ensure that our policy ask - ensuring mandatory electrical safety checks in the private rented sector in Wales - came to fruition. Initially, the Welsh Government disagreed that there was a need to improve regulations.
- 3.6 As a result of assistance from National Assembly Members, the Charity lobbied to ensure the inclusion of mandatory electrical safety checks as part of the Bill's Fitness for Human Habitation requirements.
- 3.7 Much of our concern related to poorer quality housing stock in the private rented sector in Wales, particularly in South Wales. This area has a high concentration of terraced housing dating from the mid-1850s onwards.
- 3.8 At the time of writing, the Charity is awaiting a Welsh Government announcement on the way forward. But at a meeting of the Renting Homes (Wales) Act implementation group in September 2018, confirmation was given of the Government's intention to go forward with mandatory checks, however an implementation date is yet to be announced.

REDUCING FIRES CAUSED BY ELECTRICITY IN WALES – POLICY PROGRESS

- 3.9 Electricity causes more than half of house fires in Wales per year and 42% of accidental house fires caused by a faulty fuel supply in Welsh homes were ignited by an electrical source^{viii}. Since 2015, the Charity has called for a Welsh Government strategy to reduce the number of accidental domestic electrical fires by ten per cent, over the next five years.
- 3.10 Following successful cross-party lobbying of National Assembly politicians, we secured interest in a debate by Dawn Bowden AM (*Labour, Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney*) in the Assembly on Electrical Fires in May 2017.
- 3.11 During the debate Ms. Bowden AM called for consideration of a regulatory regime for electrical testing in the private rented sector, further research into the causes of fires and a public awareness campaign supported by the Welsh Government on electrical fire prevention. The latter is a key expectation of the Charity on the Welsh Government, which is relevant to protecting people across Wales and not just in South Wales.

viii <http://gov.wales/docs/statistics/2016/160727-fire-statistics-2015-16-en.pdf>

THE KEY FINDINGS OF THE WELSH GOVERNMENT REPORT ARE^{ix}:

- It has determined that the increase in electrical fires relates to electrical distribution in South Wales, as opposed to electrical appliances or mobile devices.
- This increase seems to be a particular issue in the South Wales Region. From the data analysed, there does not appear to be a similar trend in Scotland, England or other parts of Wales.
- The report believes Fire and Rescue Authorities in Wales (FRAs) have a key role to play in preventing fires caused by electrical distribution, by sharing the Charity's advice^x. We agree with this approach, as fire officers represent a trusted public service –perhaps more so than individual electrical installers.
- The report's review of evidence mentions the age of housing^{xi} and electrical fires occur predominantly in electrical installations rather than appliances. We view this as significant given some of the anecdotal evidence we have received during outreach events in South Wales, where members of the public have informed us of their concerns about the age of their wiring and their inability to afford electrical improvements or repairs.

04.

PUTTING THE RECOMMENDATIONS INTO PRACTICE – TRAINING AND FUNDING ISSUES

- 4.1 In their report the Welsh Government made a number of recommendations for Fire and Rescue Services, including re-invigorating their electrical fire safety messaging and stating that all households experiencing an electrical distribution fire should receive a follow up Safe and Well visit. The Charity supports this, as FRAs are the 'trusted' service to undertake this work.

ix <https://gweddill.gov.wales/docs/dsjlg/publications/fire/180716-electrical-fires-in-wales-en.pdf>

x <https://www.electricalsafetyfirst.org.uk/guidance/safety-around-the-home/>

xi <https://gweddill.gov.wales/docs/dsjlg/publications/fire/180716-electrical-fires-in-wales-en.pdf> p12

- 4.2 Whilst the Welsh Government says electrical safety in Wales is a priority^{xii}, there is no specific grant available from the Welsh Government prioritising electrical safety for the most vulnerable in society. This is of particular concern for home owners who are unable to afford electrical improvements.
- 4.3 The referrals system from Home Safety Visits needs further attention and appears to need to be improved significantly. If FRAs identify safety issues in domestic properties that need electrical work, who are people referred to? What if the homeowner cannot afford to make the recommended improvements? This could result in referral processes not working correctly and therefore the recommendations suggested in the Welsh Government report falling at the first hurdle.
- 4.4 Care & Repair agencies often do not identify electrical work required until an assessment of other work has been undertaken - i.e. electrical work may need to be undertaken before other building works can commence. This can create problems with budgets, as major electrical work can often consume the entire budget.
- 4.5 There is a need to train Fire Officers to identify electrical safety risks during Home Safety Visits. The Charity's view is that there may be a correlation between electrical distribution fires and the age of the property, as electrical installations will deteriorate over time.
- 4.6 The electrical safety element of a Home Safety Visit only covers visual checks and must compete with other issues, such as trips, slips and falls etc. If a consumer unit, for example, is in a cupboard this will not usually be a part of the assessment.

05.

HOUSING IN SOUTH WALES

- 5.1 The Charity believes that the Welsh Government should further investigate a hypothesis that old housing stock, coupled with poor wiring and a lack of 'future proofing', could potentially cause electrical distribution fires.
- 5.2 South Wales has a significant amount of older, inter-connected housing stock, with open attic spaces, where fires could easily spread. Furthermore, electrical infrastructure in housing stock in South Wales is expected to undertake modern day tasks that it was not potentially designed for. The Charity, in partnership with the Fire and Rescue Services, particularly in South Wales, could develop initiatives to reduce this risk.
- 5.3 According to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, housing constructed before 1919 is at greater risk of fires. In Wales, 26% of housing was built before 1919, whereas in Scotland this is 20% and 21.2% in England. Looking at older properties in general across the UK, 36% overall predates 1945, and of those, 34% were reported to have a category 1 HHSRS hazard^{xiii}.

xii <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-north-east-wales-42077549>

xiii <https://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/welsh-housing-conditions-survey/?lang=en>

- 5.4 Looking more closely at the housing age theory in relation to South Wales, a tenth of housing predates 1875 and a third was built before the end of the First World War. The Welsh Housing Conditions Survey 2017/18 found that 28% of all households in Wales lived in a terraced house ^{xiv}.
- 5.5 From the 2011 census Rhondda Cynon Taf, Cardiff and Caerphilly have the highest number of terraced houses respectively of the 10 Local Authority areas in South Wales. **By population, Blaenau Gwent, Rhondda Cynon Taf and Merthyr Tydfil respectively have the highest proportion of terraced housing. [Annex A]**
- 5.6 Domestic electrical installations, which were installed in the 1950-60s and are now expected to meet modern household usage, are of concern. What is difficult to ascertain is the breakdown of fires by tenure. On the basis that people living in the private and social rented sectors in South Wales will receive electrical safety checks shortly, it is likely those living in the owner-occupied sector in the region will be the most vulnerable, given that an older demographic and home ownership could equal a lack of repairs due to the owner being 'asset rich and cash poor'.
- 5.7 The state of existing electrical installations across Wales should also be considered from the viewpoint of future-proofing. The way in which people use electricity in their homes has changed dramatically since the majority of Welsh homes were designed and constructed and technological developments mean this can only accelerate.
- 5.8 Electrical installations designed and installed before the mass take up of domestic electrical appliances may already be inadequate to deal with current usage patterns. An indication of this is the prevalence of extension leads in many households where there are insufficient plug sockets. This will be exacerbated if and when personal Electric Vehicles (EVs) become commonplace. The installation of solar panels and individual household energy storage units is also a foreseeable trend that will present problems - even for existing electrical installations that are in good condition. As this will occur in addition to the ever-increasing number of electrical appliances people will see as necessary for modern living.
- 5.9 Homes that are not only without a modern electrical installation but are also in a state of disrepair will be particularly difficult and expensive to bring up to a minimum standard needed to keep pace with future developments. Failing to take action now will result in increased costs and disruption in the future - perhaps even resulting in a 'drag effect' on large quantities of existing housing stock and associated local economies. Housing must be safe, warm and secure, but it is also a key driver for the economy. Failing to equip homes with the necessary infrastructure for the future can only have a detrimental effect.
- 5.10 Assuming that poverty impacts on the ability to pay for electrical home improvements, unemployment rates and the number of benefit claimants in local authority areas were considered, to determine where the highest deprivation in South Wales may be. According to the Office for National Statistics, Caerphilly and Rhondda Cynon Taf have the highest unemployment rates respectively. Similarly, Blaenau Gwent, Merthyr Tydfil and Caerphilly have the highest number of out of work benefit claimants.
- 5.11 Taking the above into account, (1) Rhondda Cynon Taff and (2) Caerphilly are the most vulnerable areas in South Wales, followed by (3) Blaenau Gwent, (4) Merthyr Tydfil and (5) Cardiff.

xiv Ibid

06.

GRANTS FOR ELECTRICAL SAFETY IN WALES

- 6.1 The Welsh Government has no dedicated grants available for electrical safety in Wales. Only £67.5m is available from Houses into Homes, and Home Improvement and Town Centre Loan Schemes^{xv}. So any electrical safety work would have to be paid out of these schemes.
- 6.2 The budget represents £3.06m per local authority in Wales, or £30.68m in the South Wales FRS area. Therefore, electrical safety would have to compete with other building improvements from this budget. **Only £139 is potentially available per terraced household in the South Wales FRS area for electrical safety improvements from current grants^{xvi}.** The Charity believes this is woefully inadequate.
- 6.3 Furthermore, the Welsh Government says that 1-2% of houses are at above average or extreme risk in terms of electrical safety^{xvii}, consequently around 5,000 terraced houses may need re-wiring in South Wales. It appears that grants for electrical safety works through current Welsh Government funding do not support dealing with major electrical works for those with limited resources, therefore this needs to be looked at in greater detail.
- 6.4 To ascertain to what extent local authorities in South Wales were helping to fund electrical home improvements, we sent a number of Freedom of Information requests regarding Home Improvement Loans and the Houses into Homes scheme.
- 6.5 Councils set their own eligibility criteria for Home Improvement Loans and anyone can apply for the Houses into Homes scheme. Only two Councils have provided any Home Improvement Loans. Most have, however, provided some Houses into Homes loans. However, for most instances, it is not known whether this money has gone towards electrical improvements.
- 6.6 From **Annexes B & C** it can be seen that under the Home Improvement Grant only two local authorities provided a grant for electrical safety repairs - Caerphilly and Vale of Glamorgan. This could include new wiring, consumer units and installations. However, no further detail on the monies available via these grants for electrical safety was forthcoming. None of the local authorities were able to advise how much was actually spent in these cases.

xv <http://cofnod.cynulliad.cymru/WrittenQuestion/77251>

xvi Methodology: £67.5m / 22 = £30.6m x 10 = £30.68m / 220259 (number of terraced housing stock in 10 local authority areas) = £139

xvii Information received from Statistics Wales – Electrical Condition and Housing Survey – “from the survey results is that under HHSRS, only 1%-2% of properties in Wales posed a significantly higher than average or extreme risk due to electrical safety, and that it was a similar picture across the three Fire & Rescue Service regions.”

HOUSES INTO HOMES

- 6.7 The Charity asked local authorities in the South Wales Fire and Rescue Service area for information on electrical safety grants available through the Houses into Homes and Towns Scheme. **From Annex D,** below, only three local authorities were able to confirm that electrical work could take place. All the others failed to provide any information. Only Bridgend Council said it could cover re-wiring.
- 6.8 It is clear that local authorities do not have the resources to improve electrical safety in homes in the South Wales FRS area if the owner-occupier has no resources to undertake this work. The Welsh Government must look at this issue more closely and prioritise an electrical improvements grant, starting in South Wales, which has had the most significant number of electrical distribution fires.

07.

CARE & REPAIR AUTHORITIES GRANT FUNDING - CASE STUDY

- 7.1 Given that there are no grants available from the Welsh Government or Local Authorities specifically for electrical safety, the only alternative for those who cannot afford improvements is to be referred to Care & Repair. At present, the Charity understands that Home Safety Visits undertaken by South Wales FRS have resulted in no referrals to Care & Repair Agencies.
- 7.2 The Charity has had a partnership approach with C&RC since 2015. C&RC has distributed the Charity's funding, totalling £20k to date, across Wales via caseworkers to people in need of electrical improvements. This is something the Charity would wish to see supported by the Welsh Government, through a pilot scheme of electrical grants in a designated local authority area.

ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE PARTNERSHIP

- C&RC has received 39 client referrals and distributed ESF funds to 38 clients.
- The average funding awarded to clients has been £263.16.
- Nine of the 13 Care & Repair agencies have applied for funding on behalf of clients. The largest number of applications received was from Cardiff, and Neath Port Talbot.

- The majority of work completed has involved the upgrading of earthing, bonding and consumer units and the installation of RCDs. The latter is an essential safety device, which cuts off the electric current to prevent an electric shock.
- 7.3 According to C&RC, *“The Electrical Safety First scheme has successfully helped to provide much needed funds to older vulnerable clients across Wales, allowing them to keep their homes safe. C&RC administration has allowed agency caseworkers to secure other funding needed much quicker, which means the desired outcome for the client is also achieved much more quickly.”*
- 7.4 C&RC provided case studies of clients highlighting the challenges to improving electrical safety arising from a lack of funding. These examples represent an ongoing problem around funding and demonstrate that the poorest owner-occupiers may not be able to afford electrical improvements. **The Charity believes the Welsh Government must consider how electrical repairs could be better funded, as this in turn will help prevent fires caused by electrical distribution in people’s homes in Wales and, in this instance, South Wales.**

Case study 1

Catherine, age 62, owner occupier, lives alone.

Catherine has fibromyalgia, memory and back problems and has had a knee replacement. Her only income is Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) of £146 per fortnight and she has no savings.

Catherine was referred to her local C&R Agency by a local advice agency after she had contacted them for help. She had an old lean-to at the back of her house that was in a poor state of repair. Water was coming through when it rained, and she was worried about the electrics. The lean-to housed her washing machine, which along with the lighting in the lean-to was running off trailing wires and extension leads from the kitchen. All the wires were getting wet when it rained and she also had a number of broken sockets in various rooms throughout the house.

Care & Repair obtained a quote from a qualified electrician to make the electrics safe. This included replacing the damaged sockets and disconnecting and making safe the electrics in the lean-to, which amounted to £698. Catherine had no savings and lived on a very low income, so Care & Repair had to apply for charitable/benevolent funds to raise the money, for repairs, before the necessary work was able to go ahead.

As Catherine had no relevant work history and no service history, fundraising proved very difficult and it took over six months before an application to the Perry Fund was successful. Following completion of the work outlined above the electrics in Catherine’s home are now safe.

Case study 2

Valerie, aged 77, owner occupier, lives with her husband.

Valerie has poor mobility, osteoporosis and a history of falls. She was referred to her local C&R Agency by a worried relative. Valerie had a number of issues with her home but was very worried about her electrics. She had old style circular sockets plus an old consumer unit with no trip switch.

Valerie had recently been assessed by an Occupational Therapist. They had advised that she needed a level access shower and referred her to the local authority for a Disabled Facility Grant (DFG). The works, however, were unable to go ahead due to the condition of the electrics in the property.

Valerie also had no central heating and was relying on gas fires to heat her home. She had been awarded a grant from Nest (the Welsh Government's funded fuel poverty scheme) for the installation of full central heating. But again, these works could not go ahead due to the state of the electrics. **A full rewire was advised.**

Valerie's partner had served in the forces so fundraising was looked at as an option to pay for the works. However, due to the length of the time this would take and how worried Valerie and her partner were about these works, they decided to pursue a Council Home Repair Loan. Under the Council loan a full rewire was completed, the Nest grant then went ahead to fit full gas central heating and the Disabled Facility Grant also went ahead to fit a level access shower.

- 7.6 The Charity has long held the policy position of supporting the introduction of electrical safety checks for home owners with one person aged over 80 in Wales; this was a key recommendation in our report produced by Swansea University. South Wales Fire and Rescue Service plays a crucial role in identifying electrical faults but C& R plays a key role in helping to pay for electrical improvements, often with very limited budgets. The Charity would recommend the Welsh Government looks closely at how secure funding can be provided to ensure electrical problems in people's homes are dealt with after they have been identified; and what happens if referrals have been made but no resource exists to undertake the work.

08.

SOUTH WALES FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE – WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

- 8.1 The Charity has developed a key partnership with South Wales Fire and Rescue Service over a number of years. This has included supporting communications, outreach events, provision of grant monies for community safety and advice on electrical safety matters. With recent attendance at the Community Risk Reduction Committee, the Charity wants to expand its partnership working throughout Wales. However, for the basis of our report South Wales is seen as a priority in terms of working to reduce fires caused by electricity.
- 8.2 One of the key recommendations of the Welsh Government’s report is that “FRAs should include advice on the need for electrical safety checks in their Safe and Well visits as a matter of course.” Whilst the Charity supports and agrees with this recommendation, a number of concerns exist about these visits as they stand, which have previously been referred to. For example:
- Fire Officers are not trained to fully identify potential electrical dangers in the home but they should, as noted in the Welsh Government’s report, be able to undertake basic checks. The electrical checks at present are only visual and if the danger is hidden, i.e. in a cupboard or behind walls, it will not be noticed.
 - South Wales Fire and Rescue Service’s Home Safety visits. **In 2017/18: 17,396 Home Safety Visits occurred and 1,028 electrical issues were identified^{xviii}**. This equates to only 6% of these Home Safety visits leading to the identification of an electrical problem. It should be noted that electrical checks are in ‘competition’ with other important initiatives during these visits, such as trips, slips and falls etc. and therefore it is not clear whether there were more electrical issues during these visits that were not identified as there was either a lack of knowledge or the issue was hidden away from view.
 - Although Fire Officers are responsible for a range of tasks, they are the trusted organisation to undertake these visits. If, like the Charity, the Welsh Government wants this to be a priority, there needs to be a reprioritisation so electrical checks are part of this activity. Fire Officers will need additional basic training to help them to identify electrical risks and also to offer advice on future-proofing in order to increase the effectiveness of these visits.
 - There are noted problems with signposting and referrals, especially if the occupier needs an electrician. Fire Officers are not permitted to recommend an electrician, for example. Furthermore, referrals to CRC may not occur and when they do, budget may be unavailable. **This needs to be fully reviewed, costed and funded by Welsh Government.**

xviii Data received from South Wales Fire and Rescue Service – March 2019

FUTURE-PROOFING

- 8.3 It appears that some preparations are being undertaken by local authorities in Wales to assist Welsh consumers on future-proofing, i.e. readiness for charging electric vehicles, however this is making slow progress.
- 8.4 Following Freedom of Information requests undertaken by the Charity, we found that of the seven local authorities out of nine in the South Wales area that responded, most of these are only at the study or planning stages for public charging points. A very low number of charging points exist in streets already in these areas. This raises potential implications of the readiness in South Wales for charging vehicles and the impact on domestic electrical installations and wiring in properties^{xix}.

09.

ESF CONCLUSION & DISCUSSION POINTS

- 9.1 Given what research data is available and following conversations with stakeholders in Wales, ESF concludes that:
 - There is a need for national coordination between Government, the FRAs and the Charity to understand the dangers associated with electrical usage in domestic properties in Wales and how to prevent fires.
 - The Welsh Government is committed to introducing mandatory electrical safety checks in the private and social rented sectors which will be the responsibility of landlords and letting agents. This will improve safety and hopefully reduce fires caused by electrical sources of ignition. However, the owner-occupied sector needs to be considered, especially those who are vulnerable and rely on Care and Repair Agency support.
 - The recommendations of the Welsh Government report rightly point at FRAs to work to help reduce fires caused by electrical sources of ignition in Wales. However we believe these need to be fully costed and thought through. It appears there are potential policy black holes with regards to Home Safety Visits and electrical safety, funding of repairs, advice given to homeowners and referral processes.

xix <https://www.electricalsafetyfirst.org.uk/media-centre/press-releases/2019/5/driven-to-danger-electric-vehicle-drivers-charging-dangerously-due-to-lack-of-public-infrastructure/>



- Given the evidence on budget constraints for electrical safety and the lack of grants available, there needs to be a focus on funding repairs for the most vulnerable home owners. Consideration should be given to grants to repair and renew electrical installations and wiring.
- There is a lack of information and data on fires with regards to tenure, housing age and required repairs. The Welsh Government was not able to give substantial information on the numbers of properties that need re-wiring in South Wales. This needs to be considered as a priority work strand.
- Fire officers need training in the provision of basic electrical safety advice and electrical advice during Home Safety visits should be seen as a priority.
- There is limited work being done with the Welsh public on future-proofing and risks, this could lead to increased domestic charging with installations that are not appropriate for these tasks.

10. ANNEX A

Local Authority Area	Population(1)	Number of Terraced Houses (2)	Percentage of terraced houses by population	Unemployment Rate % (3)	Out of work benefit claimants % (4)
Blaenau Gwent	69,609	15749	23%	5.6	16.7
Bridgend	144,208	15401	11%	5	12.7
Caerphilly	180,795	26526	15%	6	13.5
Cardiff	362,756	43612	12%	5.7	10.4
Merthyr Tydfil	59,953	12020	20%	5.5	15.7
Monmouthshire	93,590	6515	7%	3.4	7.7
Newport	151,485	20265	13%	5.4	12.6
Rhondda Cynon Taf	239,127	49322	21%	5.8	15
Torfaen	92,264	16359	18%	5.2	12.8
Vale of Glamorgan	130,690	14490	11%	3.6	9.7

Ref:

(1) Stats Wales. Population Mid 2017.

(2) NOMIS (based on 2011 census) Published June 2014

(3) Office for National Statistics - June-July 2018

(4) Stats Wales - 2016

ANNEX B

Home Improvement Grants – FOIs to Local Authorities in the South Wales area

1. How many home improvement grants have been issued in the local authority area in the last five years?
2. What estimate or figures are there for the number of terraced housing stock in the local authority area regardless of tenure.
3. Do these grants cover electrical safety improvements in housing?
4. If yes to 3, what did these cover? For example - rewiring, replacing sockets, changing a fuse box/consumer unit
5. What is the local authority's budget to cover Home Improvement grants in your area?
6. How many of these grants went to older people over 65 –what figures are available?

	Question 1	Question 2	Question 3	Question 4	Question 5	Question 6
Blaenau Gwent	None	52%	No	N/A	N/A	N/A
Bridgend	None	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Caerphilly	534	26,700	Yes	May include full rewire, renewing the fuse box, earthing and bonding, renewing sockets and switches	2018/19 is £1,140,938	Information not recorded
Cardiff	None	Info not held	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Merthyr Tydfil	None	12,600	No grants issued in ten years	N/A	None	N/A
Monmouthshire	Not provided	No answer	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Newport	No answer	38.50%	No answer	No answer	No answer	No answer
Rhondda Cynon Taf	Grant not yet operational	63015	N/A	N/A	15	N/A
Torfaen	9	16,359	No	N/A	£1,060,552	N/A
Vale of Glamorgan	5	N/A	Work has involved completely new electrical installations including new fuse box etc.	N/A	£1,626,594	N/A

ANNEX C

- How many a) How many Houses into Homes loans <https://gov.wales/topics/housing-and-regeneration/housing-supply/empty-homes/houses-into-homes/?lang=en> and b) Town Centre Loan schemes have been issued by the local authority in the last five years?
- What budget is available for a) and b)?
- What electrical safety improvements to housing in the local authority area were allocated from the above grants?
- If yes, what did these cover? For example - rewiring, replacing sockets, changing a fuse box/consumer unit?

	Question 1	Question 2	Question 3	Question 4
Blaenau Gwent	a)32 Now replaced with Land Lord loans b) 7	a) £865,466 b) £764,286	N/A	N/A
Bridgend	a)23 b)26	a)£900,000 b)no set budget	May include electrical work	could include rewiring
Caerphilly	No response			
Cardiff	a)56 b)N/A	a)£3.39m	Info not recorded	N/A
Merthyr Tydfil	a)11 b)1	a) £717,520.35 b)£1,000,000	Not answered	No info available
Monmouthshire	a)3 b)1	a)£1.2m b)£42.5k	Included rewiring work	N/A
Newport	a) 32 b)N/A	a) £884,496	Info not recorded	N/A
Rhondda Cynon Taf				
Torfaen	a)28 last five years b)7 last three years	a)£1,073,525 b)£200,000	Info not recorded	N/A
Vale of Glamorgan	a)21 b)2	a)£1626594 b) £1,045,665	a)Work has involved completely new electrical installations including new fuse box etc.	N/A

ANNEX D

Local Authority	What preparations are you undertaking as a council to prepare for Electric Vehicle charging in your area?	Are you planning or commencing work on installing on-street charging points in your area?	If yes to 3, how many charging points have been installed to date?
Rhondda Cynon Taf	Looking into it	Yes	One
Blaenau Gwent	Have installed charging points, but issues with low use/vandalism – no corporate policy.	No	6
Monmouthshire	Looking at suitable potential locations, technology, funding	Yes	None
Merthyr Tydfil	None	No	0
Bridgend	Looking at assessing potential for EV locally	No	None
Newport	Looking at suitable sites	Yes	4
Vale of Glamorgan	Set up working group	No	N/A
Cardiff	Been awarded funding	Yes	-
Torfaen	Part of a regional study	Yes	Five

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