Westminster Hall Debate: Fuel Poverty (Rural Areas)

Sarah Wollaston (Conservative, Totnes)

I congratulate my hon. Friend Dr Coffey on securing the debate. Many hon. Members have suggested solutions to the problem, but I want to emphasise a particular reason why the Minister and the House should be concerned. It is the excess of winter deaths. The fact is that 36,700 more people died in the winter of 2008-09 than expected. Even more worrying is the fact that, of the most vulnerable-those aged 75 and over-29,400 more died.

We do not have figures for excess winter deaths last year, which is unfortunate as it was a very cold winter. The figures are calculated by taking the number of deaths over the winter and comparing them with figures for the previous autumn and the summer, to the end of July. We will have those figures at the end of the month, and I expect that we will be in for a further shock. However, the figures for 2008-09 were themselves shocking, being the highest for a decade.

It is an interesting phenomenon that the further south or west one is in Europe, the higher the excess-between 5% and 30%-but we have a particular problem in this country. A study in the British Medical Journal found that a prime reason was the inadequacy of housing; it considered whether improving housing and heating would protect vulnerable people. Of course there were many other reasons, but I hope that the Minister will consider why that problem is crucial.

Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry, DUP)

What the hon. Lady says about the inadequacy of housing stock is important. Does she agree that in many regions of the UK the problem is not with housing associations or housing authorities, but with the private sector? Landlords are not always assertive in establishing whatever Warm Front schemes are available to provide better heated homes for the private-sector tenants.

Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative)

I thank the hon. Gentleman for that comment. Unfortunately, the BMJ study did not comment on that aspect, but it is an interesting point.

In the south-west, 11.7% of households, or 259,000 people, live in fuel poverty. It is a serious problem, and many Members have spoken about why that is the case in rural areas. Hard-to-treat housing stock with solid walls are a particular problem. Tim Farron spoke strongly about rural households being disadvantaged because fuel costs for transport are so high. There is an inadequate bus service, which means that people have to travel quite long distances by car, thus putting them at a double disadvantage. Moreover, they are hit again by the fact that their housing costs are high. In my constituency, we have some of the lowest wages in Britain, so we are disadvantaged on all fronts. I hope that the Minister will address those points.