

## ESAN Members’ Meeting

### Thursday 24 April 2025 in London and online

### 1.43pm – 3.25pm

#### Draft minutes

#### Attendees:

Professor Cosmo Graham, ESAN Chair; Chris Downs, ESAN Treasurer; Andy White, CCW; Juliette Flach, Christians Against Poverty; Emily Wojcik, Fair By Design; Meg Van Rooyen Money Advice Trust; Natalie Ogden, TAG; Tim Dodsworth, ESAN Trustee, University of Reading; Zoe McLeod and David Murray, Sustainability First; Matt Copeland, NEA; David Southgate, Scope; Geraint Davies, Ofwat; Rosalind Stevens, previous ESAN Co-ordinator

Vanessa Goodchild-Bradley, ESAN Coordinator

Apologies were received from: Tony Leach, VRS; Frankie Galvin, Fair By Design and Karen Smyth, CCNI

### 1. Welcome and introductions

1.1 The Chairman welcomed members to the meeting and all those present introduced themselves.

1.2 Professor Graham provided an introduction to the meeting, the current situation for ESAN and the context for the first presentation, the proposal from Sustainability First.

Trustees had agreed to wind up the ESAN charity, due to income not covering costs. Trustees hoped that the ESAN network would continue and had asked members for any proposals to enable this. Sustainabiltiiy First had sent a proposal to run the network and had met with the Trustees to discuss this. Trustees were happy to recommend the proposal to members, but it would be up to members to decide on the proposal.

The plan was still to wind up the ESAN charitable incorporated organisation (CIO). Sustainability First proposed taking over the ESAN contacts and running the network and Trustees agreed this was the best option to continue the network. After the meeting today, there would be a special general meeting on Thursday 22 May 1.30pm on zoom, for members to vote on a formal resolution to wind up the CIO and a resolution to transfer the surplus ESAN funds to Sustainability First. Professor Graham explained that the availability of the surplus was key to Sustainability First taking on the network and paying for a coordinator.

The notice of the 22 May meeting and resolutions would be sent to members soon.

### 2. Presentation: Zoe McLeod, Associate and David Murray, Executive Director, Sustainability First:

[*Proposal*](https://www.independentage.org/policy-and-research/research-reports/single-social-tariff-water?_gl=1*qt0mym*_up*MQ..*_ga*NDg3MDA4OTMyLjE3MzY3NzgzMTQ.*_ga_TGBBW3PC3T*MTczNjc3ODMxMy4xLjEuMTczNjc3ODMxOS4wLjAuMA..) *for the Future of ESAN*

2.1 Zoe McLeod introduced the Sustainability First proposal. Zoe shared a summary of the proposal to take on the running of the ESAN network and provided background information about Sustainability First, its’ focus on a fairer and more sustainable energy and water future and the shared history and connections between the organisations.

2.2 Zoe explained the common objectives and aims with ESAN. Sustainability First was well placed to take on the running of the network due to its’

* Good relationships with regulators, government and utility companies.
* Engagement with vulnerability and fuel poverty issues.
* Established reputation.

2.3 Zoe had met with a number of ESAN members to get their feedback on what ESAN currently offered and what members valued. Most were keen to continue as members if ESAN moved to Sustainability First.

2.4 The Sustainability First proposal included revamping the network to create more of a focus and action on:

* Sharing information, research, innovation and lived experience.
* Facilitating joint events.
* Supporting member responses to consultations.

The proposal saw the potential for ESAN to provide input into new policy ideas and approaches. A revamped network would be more strategic in looking ahead and planning for opportunities to influence policy and coordinate member responses to consultations. It would continue to focus on energy and water, as well as communications and financial services, with the possibility of covering transport in future.

2.5 Zoe had received a lot of feedback from members about ESAN meetings. This included the challenge of hybrid meetings, with members preferring meetings to be either remote or face to face. Members valued the networking opportunities and the proposal for meetings was to change to a model of two face to face meetings each year to provide these opportunities around a focus on a key issue. Alongside this, there would be online ad-hoc meetings to support policy responses, and short online ‘breakfast briefings’ to share research and insights from members, industry and academia.

2.6 Zoe said that member feedback on the ESAN newsletter was that it was popular and valued. The proposal was to keep the newsletter broadly similar but to review the format and frequency, add research, publications and government regulatory decisions. The newsletter would be informed by more horizon scanning of relevant issues and events.

The ESAN website was not particularly well used or valued.

2.7 Expanding the network would be a key focus over the next year, with the aim of attracting more charity members and bringing back regulators that had left (including Ofgem and Ofcom). The proposal was to gradually bring in more regional members and more lived experience, as well as creating links to academic research, to government policy development and to Citizens Advice.

2.8 Zoe summarised the current ESAN funding model and the need to look at different models over the next year that could put the network on a sustainable financial footing whilst being affordable for charity members. This could include sponsorship or foundation funding, if it ensured that ESAN remained independent. Member subscriptions would re-start for the 2025-26 year. Sustainability First would also need to invest in the network to improve its reach and value to members. They were confident there was space and a role for ESAN with the other networks that also existed now.

Sustainability First trustees would oversee the network, but the ESAN funding (initial surplus and subscriptions) would be ring-fenced for the network, with a separate financial report to members.

The plan would be to review the progress of the network after 12 months.

***Questions and discussion***

*Q: (David, Scope): The proposal sounds great – are there other essential services that you would like ESAN to cover?*

*A: None of the members fed back on this, but it would be defined by what is practicable. We would start with the existing services but there is a key link to housing, due to energy efficiency and fuel poverty.*

Other members present said that the proposal was a good opportunity for ESAN to continue.

Professor Graham said that the proposal would be presented to members at the 22 May special general meeting. There would be resolutions to wind up the charity and to transfer ESAN assets. The resolutions would need three quarters of those voting in favour in order to pass. Professor Graham encouraged all members to attend the meeting, or to send a proxy vote. Details about the meeting and voting system would be shared with all members shortly. Any questions should be directed to the coordinator: admin@esan.org.uk.

3. Presentation: Juliette Flach, Senior Policy and Public Affairs Officer, Christians Against Poverty (CAP):

***The state of financial difficulty in the UK:*** *insights**from CAP's polling conducted by Opinium in December*

3.1 Juliette introduced the CAP presentation and the research that CAP undertook on poverty and debt. CAP had published 4 different pieces of research this week:

* [Child poverty](https://capuk.org/news-and-blog/new-research-child-poverty)
* [In-person debt advice](https://capuk.org/news-and-blog/new-research-in-person-debt-advice)
* [The inequality of poverty](https://capuk.org/news-and-blog/new-research-the-inequality-of-poverty)
* [Employment](https://capuk.org/news-and-blog/new-research-employment)

3.2 The CAP polling of two thousand people had been undertaken in December 2024. This showed that 21% had a deficit budget, which was the same percentage as in the previous polling in June 2024. 18% of those polled had debt that they were struggling to repay, whilst 7% had to borrow money to buy food.

3.3 In-work poverty was a key issue, with the polling figures mirroring those seen in CAPs clients. Working, even full-time, did not always pull people out if financial insecurity.

3.4 Polling showed clear gender, social and ethnicity divides in terms of people’s financial insecurity and anxiety. There were also sharp contrasts between different age groups, with much higher percentages of those aged 18 to 34 reporting:

* Borrowing money to buy food
* Not having the confidence to seek higher paid work
* Having a deficit budget
* Struggling to replay debt

The polling highlighted the need to acknowledge the disparities between different groups, as well as the need for more targeted support and raising awareness of available support.

3.5 Juliette invited members to contribute their thoughts and experience on how better to support these groups, to share what they were already doing and what more could be done.

***Questions and discussion***

Members made the following points:

* Carers were a group that experienced poverty and were unable to increase their income.
* Some people were unaware of the Priority Services Register. Charities were looking at this and whether this needed to be improved. Currently, its’ scope did not cover situations where a person was vulnerable due to debt.
* Polly Billington MP had sponsored a private members bill requiring energy companies to provide a social tariff for low income customers. Scope had sent a briefing to Polly, had spoken to her today and also attended the second reading of the bill. Scope wanted to keep up the pressure on this bill.
* April has been an awful month for National Debtline clients, 43% of whom are on deficit budgets, because of the increases in energy, water and telecoms.

*Q: (Zoe, SF) Is the work on a single social tariff for water considering eligibility for the working poor?*

*A: (Andy, CCW): There are still outstanding discussions on the tariff and no decisions yet on this issue.*

*Q: Is there potential to push on this, to ensure that the working poor are included?*

*A: There is a trade-off between the simplicity of the scheme and the complexity of meeting the needs of the working poor.*

*Q: Is there any sense that the government policies to raise the minimum wage and abolish zero-hours contracts might help?*

*A: (Juliette, CAP) insecure work and part-time work are factors, particularly when people have unexpected costs. A key concern is about income levels and rates of pay, including whether the minimum wage is high enough.*

Juliette said that for many people their budget just did not balance. Debt charities can support people out of debt, but they will then be pulled back into debt.

Juliette shared a link to the CAP briefing on Deficit budgets: The cost to stay alive, which she had presented at the October 2024 ESAN members meeting:

[Deficit budgets: The cost to stay alive | CAP UK](https://capuk.org/about-us/policy-and-research/deficit-budgets-the-cost-to-stay-alive)

***Break***

4. Roundtable discussion: Andy White, CCW; Matt Copeland, NEA; David Southgate, Scope

***The outlook for essential services in 2025*** *- s*ummary from colleagues on industry issues, bills, customer support, and progress in ensuring affordable access for vulnerable people

4.1 Andy White shared an update on CCW’s work on a water social tariff, recommendations for WaterSure and the consultation on CCW’s proposed improvements to the Guaranteed Standards Scheme, which it was hoped would be implemented by government soon.

CCW was continuing to discuss a single social tariff for water with the government and hoped to see progress on this soon.

WaterSure supported 230,000 households, providing an average £286 reduction in water bills. CCW had sent its recommendations to improve the scheme in December and would like to see Defra consult on changes this summer.

Other financial support schemes for vulnerable people included payment breaks, income maximisation advice, hardship funds and debt support, including payment matching to help clear debt.

Andy explained the expectations on water companies to set out their vulnerability strategies. CCW was encouraging companies to be ambitious in supporting vulnerable people to register for Priority Services (PSR). At present, 3.1 million customers (around 10%) were registered. CCW think up to 50% of households could be eligible.

CCW was also focusing on how water companies deal with debt, complaints and incidents. The government had asked CCW to lead on the new consumer panels.

4.2 Matt Copeland shared an update from NEA on priorities this year, including:

* Work to support households this coming winter
* A fair transition to net zero.
* Changes to energy markets

NEA was campaigning for government to extend the Warm Homes Discount so that this reached households not on benefits. NEA also think the current level of support (£150) is insufficient.

On net zero, the government Warm Homes plan to de-carbonise homes was focused on the Fuel Poverty Strategy consultation. NEA think the plan needs to be more ambitious and efforts should focus on those most affected by fuel poverty. Single parents were a group that were particularly affected. The plan should also include measures to reduce energy costs.

On energy markets, NEA wanted the Ofgem debt strategy to help as many people as possible. NEA think that the proposed zero standing charge would help some households, but customers with pre-payment meters (PPM) were most affected by standing charges. Having an opt-in zero standing charge might not work, as so many customers did not contact their suppliers. Therefore, Ofgem needed to develop more bespoke solutions for PPM customers.

4.3 David Southgate, Scope (David would be moving to Independent Age soon) provided an update on recent work and areas of focus. These included tackling issues around disability and employment and highlighting the extra costs faced by people with disabilities.

Scope research had found that disabled households were most at risk of missing out. They needed an additional £1,010 each month to have the same standard of living as non-disabled households. This included spending 8% more on energy and water. Debt on energy was continuing to mount and was also rising on water, as bills were increasing. Council tax increases and cuts to benefits were a big issue this year. Scope was keen to support other charities on work to address debt issues.

Many consumers found it difficult to navigate essential service markets, social tariffs, support etc. This meant that there were a lot of things that they could miss out on and there was a danger of having a two-tier market.

Scope wanted to see disability benefits added to the eligibility for the Warm Homes Discount, for the scheme to be extended beyond 2026 and to be expanded to reach more people.

On a social tariff for energy, Scope was working with other charities on the best option and aimed to publish proposals in June or July this year. David said he would like to talk to ESAN members again on preferred options. Scope was keen that disability benefits were added to the eligibility for a water social tariff and also that disability benefit rates were increased.

***Questions and Discussion***

### Members made the following points:

Andy, CCW: We are waiting for government direction on a water social tariff. We know government are keen and we expect to see progress soon. There is a different time scale for Wales and CCW would like to see the plans extended to Wales soon.

*Q: (Juliette, CAP): Are you expecting a consultation on a water social tariff this summer?*

*A (Andy, CCW): This is subject to Defra timeframes, but we know they want to move forward on this.*

*Q (Zoe, SF): Is there any sense that the Guaranteed Standards proposals will get the go-ahead?*

*A: There has been a positive response from Defra to CCW’s proposals.*

*Q: Is there a risk that water companies will be disincentivised to recruit people to register on PSR if GSS standards are applied to it?*

*A: Water companies have a core set of requirements, including providing braille bills, and bottled water and compensation if supplies are cut off.*

*Q: Is there any sense that work on developing a multi-sector PSR has been paused?*

*A: We have heard this, which is disappointing. We had understood that PSR would expand to cover telecoms.*

*Q: Are you expecting that any extension to the Warm Homes Discount will be short-term and what are the timeframes for a consultation?*

*A: (Matt, NEA): We think government will need to consult before the summer, to implement any changes before winter. The government may do an extension first and then go for a bigger reform. We expect government will want to announce their plans once they have had the spending review.*

### 5. Members updates

5.1 Attendees shared updates, which would also be included in the April ESAN newsletter.

5.2 Scope: David Southgate said Scope would be publishing its research on social tariffs in June or July.

5.3 Fair By Design (FBD): Emily Wojcik reported that FBD would launch a Lived Experience Panel the following week. The panel’s feedback would inform FBD work and could also be used by ESAN to support the network in future.

5.4 Trust Alliance Group (TAG): Natalie Ogden said TAG had responded to the Ofgem consultation on smart meters and the Ofcom consultation on reducing timescales for consumers to escalate complaints. TAG was waiting for the DESNZ consultation on the future of Ofgem, including the role of the Energy Ombudsman.

5.5 Money Advice Trust (MAT): Meg Van Rooyen had shared information about MAT’s recent [Vulnerability Conference.](https://moneyadvicetrust.org/vulnerability-conference/)in the ESAN April newsletter. MAT had co-ordinated a letter from a number of charities to Ofgem, requesting that they re-think the proposals for the Debt Relief Scheme and return to the original plans. MAT was waiting for the consultation on the Scheme and also for Ofcom’s debt standards consultation.

MAT was working on an insolvency report, which would include the development of new solutions.

5.6 Ofwat: Geraint Davies shared details of Ofwat’s collaboration with Defra and CCW on a single social tariff, WaterSure and the Guaranteed Standards Scheme. Ofwat had a lot of reports coming out this year and would share these with ESAN. Geraint reiterated Ofwat’s support for the ESAN network.

5.7 Sustainability First: Zoe McLeod shared information about new research on water companies, to be published in June. Future forecasts for vulnerability showed an increase in all areas. Sustainability First was looking at the costs of de-commissioning gas and the probability that customers left on the gas network would pay more in future.

### 6. Members Meeting February 2025 minutes and matters arising

6.1 APPROVED**:** Members ***approved*** the minutes of the 19 February ESAN members meeting with no amendments.

6.2 Matters arising:

The meeting reviewed the progress of actions from the last meeting:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Item** | **Action** | **Who** | **Deadline** |
| **5.6** | **Members to send proposals regarding alternatives to winding up ESAN and allocation of surplus funds.** | **All members** | **ASAP** |
| **7.6** | **Coordinator to add CAP presentation to April agenda.** | **Coordinator** | **April** |
| **9.2** | **Members interested in hosting or presenting at the April meeting to contact** **admin@esan.org.uk** | **All members** | **ASAP** |

All actions from the meeting had been completed, with the following /updates:

*A5.7: All members to send proposals regarding alternatives to winding up ESAN and allocation of surplus funds:*

ESAN trustees had been very pleased to receive the Sustainability First proposal.

There were no other matters arising.

### 7. Any Other Business

7.1 None.

### 8. Next meeting date:

8.1 The next ESAN meeting was an online special general meeting to take place on Thursday 22 May 2025 at 1.30pm on zoom. All members would be sent a formal notice of the meeting and the resolutions to wind up the ESAN charity and transfer the remaining assets. Following the meeting, a paper copy of the resolution decision would then be sent to all members by post.

Please send any questions about the meeting to the coordinator at: **admin@esan.org.uk**

### 9. Chairman’s closing remarks

9.1 Professor Graham said he had chaired ESAN since 2019 and had enjoyed the opportunities to engage with members. He was very pleased to recommend the Sustainability First proposal to continue the ESAN network. It was very important to have this space for voluntary organisations and regulators to set the agenda, rather than just being consulted.

Professor Graham thanked his fellow ESAN trustees, Chris Down and Tim Dodsworth for all their help and work as trustees and also thanked Vanessa Goodchild-Bradley for her work as the ESAN coordinator.

There being no further business, Professor Graham thanked Zoe McLeod and David Murray (Sustainability First), Juliette Flach (CAP), Andy White (CCW), Matt Copeland (NEA) and David Southgate (Scope) for their presentations and roundtable and members for their contributions.

Professor Graham hoped to see members on Thursday 22 May 1.30pm on zoom:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82382343471?pwd=e0i0gSeAnIb9ZCJ1DKop8XksSvRmhr.1>

Meeting ID: 823 8234 3471

Passcode: 474435

The meeting closed at 3.25pm.