

# Supporting fuel poor disabled people through energy efficiency measures

Practitioner guide by UKERC, University of York and Disability Rights UK



## Foreword

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Too often fuel poverty is thought of as an issue that only impacts older disabled people, but the reality is that fuel poverty blights the lives of disabled people of any age: from children, to adults of working age, to older people. Thirty per cent of families living in poverty contain a disabled person and are at particular risk of experiencing fuel poverty<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, research has found that people living with a long-term condition aged 24-54 are 50 per cent more likely to be living in poverty than their able-bodied peers<sup>2</sup>. The effects of fuel poverty can penetrate deep into everyday life and exacerbate existing impairments and health conditions.

One of the main approaches to dealing with fuel poverty at the national level is through energy efficiency policies. Research from the *Policy Pathways to Justice in Energy Efficiency* project shows how current policy is overly focused on targets and low cost provision to the exclusion of the people living in fuel poor homes. The research also shows how households in need are difficult to find, that they do not receive adequate information that is accessible and from a trusted source, and how their needs are not always taken into consideration during the installation process.

The delivery of energy efficiency policy is variable and patchy, and there is a lack of knowledge and awareness of the specific needs of disabled people.

This guide for practitioners takes these findings and turns them into practical steps for people working in the fuel poverty and energy efficiency sectors. It should be read by everyone whose job involves supporting disabled people in fuel poor households, and its findings should be considered when helping people to live free from fuel poverty and thereby enjoying an enhanced quality of life.

## Understanding energy needs

In the UK fuel poverty is understood to be an interaction between housing conditions, energy costs, and low incomes. For disabled people, it is often compounded by factors such as unsuitable housing, unemployment, rurality, fluctuating health conditions, high energy needs, and changes in benefits.

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2017), 'UK Poverty 2017'

<sup>2</sup> Institute for Fiscal Studies (2018), 'Living standards, poverty and inequality in the UK: 2018', p. 59.

Certain impairments and conditions require additional heating, either at higher temperatures, or for longer (or both). Within our research the need for longer periods of warmth and/or higher temperatures was raised by numerous respondents with a variety of different impairments and conditions including heart conditions, respiratory diseases, and muscular skeletal conditions. There are other factors that may also increase energy needs, and within this project respondents described using more energy to run nebulisers, stair lifts and hoists, for charging wheelchairs, and having to undertake additional washing and drying. In one case a respondent's daughter had multiple disabilities which meant she was on energy dependent equipment including a feeding machine that operated overnight.

The impact of dealing with energy alongside other issues in people's lives were also described, for example, one respondent highlighted the impact of financial concerns about energy on her mental and physical health: *'My brain says I'm spending extra money which gives me anxiety which starts my asthma off'*. Another respondent, living in rural area described how her disability had started to prevent her from gathering free fuel (peat) from her local environment, something that had a knock on effect in terms of her ability to affordably heat her home. The circumstances described above often led to an increased cost in household energy, higher risk of disconnection from mains energy supply, and adverse impacts on health as a result of a drop in ambient temperatures.

## What are the barriers to tackling fuel poverty?

In the UK one of the main policy approaches to addressing fuel poverty is via energy efficiency measures such as installing new heating systems and insulation, with disabled people considered to be a policy priority (other, income based approaches include the Warm Home Discount for example). Households can access energy efficiency schemes in a variety of ways. Some schemes proactively seek out eligible households, others rely on referrals through a mix of private, third, and public sector organisations, and others use marketing campaigns to encourage households to come forward. However, evidence from our study suggests that households struggle to engage with information relating to energy efficiency measures. The main reasons for this relate to: a lack of trust in the source of the information (for example, if it has come through an energy company or

installer); confusion about eligibility or availability of schemes given the volume of information available on the internet; the way in which schemes are marketed – e.g. in a generic, non-personal way, or relying on specific communication channels such as the internet that not all households have access to. Nevertheless, even when households overcame these initial barriers, a number of other issues often prevented them from going ahead with the installation of energy efficiency measures.

**Disruption:** households in our study were concerned about potential short-term damage and mess being caused to their homes and the disruption this would cause to household routines, for example disruption to, or having to move equipment was raised as a substantial issue. In some instances respondents were concerned about the impact of installation work on their energy supply, for a respondent with a daughter who used a nebuliser, any disruption to the energy supply needed to be carefully planned. Equally, another respondent outlined the need for notice and clear timescales to ensure that there was no disruption to her daughter's medical routine. Other respondents described having fluctuating conditions which meant that they couldn't guarantee that they would be able to manage an installation on a specific day. Long term disruption was also considered by households. Several respondents described having bulky (but essential) equipment as a result of a disabled family member, and if the installation work interfered with the use or storage of this then it was unlikely to be undertaken.

**Prohibitive administrative and physical requirements:** the process of completing paperwork and dealing with the details of an installation were also described by some respondents as overwhelming. One interviewee reported being unable to complete paperwork due to the effects of their medication, another respondent described not having the energy required to cope with navigating between organisations and trying to establish eligibility. Furthermore, where installations required preparatory work – e.g. clearing a loft space, many of our respondents were unable to undertake this themselves, and without social or familial support were limited in their ability to fulfill the installer's requirements.

**Cost:** householders were concerned about direct and indirect costs associated with work. In some instances they were asked to make a financial contribution. Even relatively small costs such as £60 for an Energy Performance Certificate prevented the work from going ahead.

## What can be done to help alleviate the effects of fuel poverty on disabled people?

Research findings indicate that generic marketing of energy efficiency schemes often fails to reach the most vulnerable households. Instead eligible households need to be actively sought out via a variety of approaches, which may include:

**Working in a range of places frequented by disabled people or parents of disabled children, and through organisations that are already trusted (often referred to as trusted intermediaries).** Aside from more generic services such as Citizens Advice or the Department for Work and Pensions, charities supporting households with specific disabilities, GPs and other medical services, social work and health visitors were all cited as organisations that could both identify and refer households into energy efficiency schemes. There are examples of these forms of working across the UK, ranging from fully funded partnerships between organisations (e.g. between energy companies, local authorities, the health sector and NGOs), through to more informal ways of working such as encouraging GPs and health visitors to make referrals into energy efficiency schemes. Whilst the kind of organisations that can act as intermediaries have been under severe financial strain over the last decade, there are examples of positive forms of action which are detailed in our full report [[www.ukerc.ac.uk/pathways-to-justice-energy-efficiency.html](http://www.ukerc.ac.uk/pathways-to-justice-energy-efficiency.html)]. With this caveat, we recommend where possible, the use of trusted intermediaries to link households with schemes. Within our study one of the most prominent ways that disabled people

and parents of disabled children engaged with energy efficiency information and advice was via social media. Facebook groups were named as a way that households shared information about energy and energy efficiency measures, exchanging information about eligibility, costs, and photos of the work itself. For less mobile respondents online sources of information such as these provided a trustworthy, accessible way of obtaining information. Providing information through social media including photos, encouraging reviews, and having an online presence could have a positive impact on take up.

**Supporting disabled people through the installation process and beyond.** Given the issues described above, households are often risk averse and require sufficient time to discuss such concerns with installers. Households in our study described needing installers to understand the need to be flexible (for example, working around medical routines or fluctuating conditions), and discussing the full implications of any proposed work, both in the short and long term. Furthermore, whilst many respondents commented that face to face visits prior to installation work had been helpful to allay concerns (or commented on the lack of these having the opposite effect), others indicated that face to face visits did not necessarily suit the needs of the household where the fluctuating nature of their conditions meant that their capacity to deal with visitors changed day by day. The key issue here is the importance of recognising the need for a bespoke process, tailored to household needs, as well as the provision of accessible information. Households also described support being provided via social or familial networks (either to alleviate the administrative burden, or helping with physical demands). For households without such networks one key form of support that could be provided is via the intermediaries above to ensure that household needs are fully met.

**From a household perspective the following features make up a positive experience:**

**Home visits:** The option of home visits is an essential part of ensuring scheme uptake among vulnerable groups.

**Pre work agreement:** This should detail the most appropriate work for the household, any additional support required, what the household can expect, and who they can contact throughout the process.

**Informed installers:** Those people entering the home – usually installers – need sufficient information, knowledge, and understanding of the needs of the people within the home.

**A single point of contact:** Having a single point of contact throughout the duration of a household's involvement in a scheme is useful for building trust and oversight. This point of contact should have sufficient understanding of the household's needs.

**The inclusion of advocacy services and agencies:** Such organisations may be able to provide additional practical and organisational support throughout the process.

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## How policy might be improved in the future

Whilst this guide has focused on the needs of disabled people and ways in which these might be met under existing policy frameworks, the project has also set out a number of policy recommendations that aim to shape future policy.

- **Rethink policy targets.** At present the main energy efficiency policy, ECO, requires energy companies to deliver carbon savings at a low cost. However, this emphasis encourages the installation of certain measures that are the cheapest to install and is often at odds with the specific needs of the household. We recommend that if a policy such as ECO is to continue, requirements placed on energy companies are aligned with fuel poverty objectives that foreground the diverse and complex needs of households.
- **Make eligibility as stable and consistent as possible.** Households in need are not always eligible, for example, where eligibility is tied to receipt of certain benefits. Furthermore, in England, the availability of schemes may depend on how close a supplier is to meeting its targets. We recommend that national policy should make scheme eligibility as stable as possible, and ensure that eligibility criteria fully include key vulnerable groups.
- **Improve mechanisms for identifying households.** It can be difficult for organisations to find and access the households that need support the most. Moreover, whilst trusted intermediaries have the capacity to identify and support households, their role in the delivery of energy efficiency measures requires greater recognition and resources. We recommend better data access and data matching/sharing alongside appropriate recognition of the role that intermediaries play, with improved resourcing to support this.
- **Focus on the needs of households and how they use and engage with energy, instead of the current focus on technical improvements to buildings.** We recommend that future policy supports households in a way that is joined up and acknowledges specific needs. One of the most effective ways of helping households, especially those in crisis, is to combine energy efficiency support with a range of other entitlement checks and support with debt.
- **Aim for consistent outcomes for households wherever they live.** Variable policy delivery arises as a result of numerous local and regional factors. We recommend that a national scheme is reintroduced in England, rather than relying on proactive local authorities, which can result in a 'postcode lottery'.

