

Supporting fuel poor families through energy efficiency measures

Practitioner guide by UKERC, University of York and The Children's Society



Foreword

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Fuel poverty remains a pressing issue for over 4 million households in the UK today. Families with children living on low incomes are at particular risk of experiencing fuel poverty, and its effects can penetrate deep into everyday life and into the practical, social and emotional worlds of those who encounter it. Better cash support for fuel poor families is crucial; however, whilst many of the poorest families face the highest energy bills because of poor home insulation, a key way of dealing with fuel poverty at the national level must be through energy efficiency policy.

The evidence gathered through the *Policy Pathways to Justice in Energy Efficiency* project is based on in-depth research conducted with national policy makers, with stakeholders who implement energy efficiency policy and with households on low incomes. It provides a clear picture of the energy needs of families on low incomes and of what needs to happen to make a real difference in their lives. For example, the evidence shows that parents are very conscious of the importance of providing a warm home for their children, as well as their wider housing conditions. Many described having to put in place strict heating routines that maximised children's warmth, as well practices to minimise the costs of cooking or washing.

The research shows how families in greatest need are not always eligible for support, how these households are often difficult to find, how their needs are not always taken into consideration within fuel poverty interventions, and how the delivery of energy efficiency policy is variable and patchy.

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 people in fuel poor families, and its findings should be considered when helping people to live free from fuel poverty. Perhaps then we will start to see a real difference in the quality and consistency of energy provision for some of our most vulnerable, fuel poor neighbours.

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 low income families 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 overcome these initial barriers, a number of other issues sometimes prevent them from going ahead with the installation of energy efficiency measures.

Disruption: households in our study were concerned about how much mess the work would create, and whether the information they were given about this in advance was accurate. These concerns were not unfounded, with numerous examples of work exceeding planned timeframes and leaving behind unexpected damage. However, concerns were not simply about the direct impact of the work, but also related to how the installation would impact on household routines such as children's nap times, homework, bed times, and school hours:

‘Because I have a disabled child they need to give me half an hour's notice before they arrive at my door because I could be giving her medication or she could be on the nebuliser’.

Sometimes even the process of speaking to energy efficiency advisors over the phone can be considered difficult and disruptive – amongst participants in our study, this was especially the case for those with young children. Furthermore, the idea of deviating from tightly organised energy routines can cause some households anxiety as energy use and payments are often closely monitored on a daily basis. For households living in small homes some proposed energy efficiency measures would also result in a loss of space – for example the potential loss of an attic room, or storage space.

Cost: householders in our study were concerned about direct and indirect costs associated with the installation of energy efficiency measures. In some instances householders had been asked to make a financial contribution. Even relatively small costs were often regarded as prohibitive, and moreover, where payment was requested it raised concerns that additional requests for money will follow later on. Relating to concerns about the physical mess caused by work, householders were worried about having to spend money on redecoration, a concern that was often realised:

‘The people made me aware it was going to be messy but I didn't realise how messy, like my carpets were ripped up, my bathroom floor ripped up; it was just, oh, it was shocking’.

What can be done to help alleviate the effects of fuel poverty on families?

Findings from this research indicate that generic marketing of energy efficiency schemes will often fail to reach the most vulnerable households. Instead eligible families need to be actively sought out via a variety of approaches, which may include:

Working in a range of places frequented by families, and through organisations that are already in contact with families and who are trusted by them (often referred to as trusted intermediaries). These include children's centres, children's charities, food banks, Tenants' Associations, and schools.

Working with public sector agencies including health visiting teams, social workers, child protection and housing teams. The importance of working with these agencies is clear, given their knowledge of the population that they work with. 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 voluntary and community sector organisations), 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]. With this caveat, we recommend where possible, the use of trusted intermediaries to link households with schemes.

Working with community, social and familial networks. Where households are able to discuss and view energy efficiency measures with people they trust they are often able to alleviate the concerns highlighted above. In our study, talking to friends, family or neighbours who have had work undertaken was found to have a positive impact, as did sharing photos and information on social media sites (for example via parenting groups on Facebook). Households using social media to find out about work were less concerned about the trustworthiness of the information they received compared to those contacting

their energy company, for example. This suggests that providing information through social media including photos, encouraging reviews, and having an online presence could have a positive impact on take up. See our main report for more details of this.

Supporting families through the installation process and beyond. Whilst working with intermediaries can be one of the best ways of finding eligible families, in many cases they can also play a significant role in providing ongoing energy related support. 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. From an energy perspective this enables a broader range of measures to be explored (for example, energy debt support, Warm Home Discount) that will typically make energy efficiency measures more effective. Moreover, given the often-complex eligibility criteria associated with many of the UK energy efficiency schemes, a 'one touch' service such as this is able to provide tailored support without raising expectations about specific forms of help, as well as being able to refer households into new energy efficiency schemes as they open. Not only does this approach address the issues of trust outlined above, but it also tackles the wider context of all the issues that a household may be facing, rather than simply addressing the physical characteristics of the building. From a household perspective the following features make up a positive experience:

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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 households needs.

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

How policy might be improved in the future

Whilst this guide has focused on the needs of families 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. These are:

- **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 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'.

