Communicating Energy Vulnerability:

An exploration of energy advice within and

beyond formal settings

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For Grandad

The world's greatest storyteller.

You bet there's a bit of you in this one, too.

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Acknowledgements

If, like me, in the dark, desperate, and distracted PhD moments you turn to other theses to read the acknowledgments for some uplifting and much-needed focus, purpose, and direction, then this first nod is for you. You've got this. You'll get there. You will write your acknowledgements, add your appendices, and delete that final comment. For now, though, just remember it's one foot in front of the other.

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Abbreviations

CKN   Community Knowledge Network

CMoA   Communication Model of Advice

EAS   Energy-related Advice and Support

LIHC   Low Income High Cost indicator

PPM   Prepayment Meters

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to generate a better understanding of the role of energy-related advice and support – an area that has been regarded as underexplored and undervalued, yet a critical part of the package of efforts to tackle fuel poverty. The study examines the experiences of energy vulnerability and related advice and support within and beyond formal energy advice services focusing on lived experience, the role of social relations, framings and factors involved in determining effectiveness, and the distinct and interrelated role of informal sources, settings and styles of advice. Theorising energy-related advice and support through the lens of Goldsmith's (2004) Communication Model of Advice, it argues for this mechanism of tackling fuel poverty to be regarded as essential, not complementary. Further, it calls for energy advice and support to be characterised less by definable inputs and measurable outputs, instead viewing it as a social process, where contexts, perceptions of self, and relations with others play critical roles. Adopting a qualitative methodology rooted in phenomenological psychology, the study explores lived experience through a narrative-thematic analysis of twenty-four in-depth semi-structured interviews with energy advisors and households. The analysis, structured around three overarching themes, presents a bottom-up framing for how effective energy-related advice can be characterised. It argues that effectiveness is understood in practical, informational and emotional terms, and can be located at the intersection of three areas – *problems*, *people*, and *process* - which should be given greater prominence in research, policy and practice where effective provision is a central aim.

Keywords: *energy advice, energy vulnerability, fuel poverty, lived experience, phenomenology, psychology, social policy.*

Chapter One: Introducing the Research

1.1 Introducing the research problem

Fuel poverty is a complex social problem where low income, poor housing and the cost of energy intersect (Boardman, 1991). Estimates suggest that across the UK, as many as 3.5 million households face a situation in which they are unable to access or afford adequate energy for good health, wellbeing and comfort in the home. Across Europe, this figure rises to between 50-125 million households (Atanasiu, Kontonasiou & Mariottini, 2014). The UK, compared to other European countries, however, performs particularly badly, despite the cost of energy being comparatively low and being regarded as a nation with one of the most established track records in recognition of the issue and efforts to eradicate it in research and policy (Bouzarovski, Tirado-Herrero & Petrova, 2014). This is primarily due to poor standard of housing in the UK where some of the least energy efficient housing is located (ACE, 2015).

'Fuel poverty', a term most commonly used in the UK context - where the research set out in this thesis is focused - first emerged in social policy research in 1979 (Isherwood & Hancock, 1979) and has been a recognised social issue in UK Government policy since the introduction of the first Fuel Poverty Strategy in 2001, attributed by many to the work of Boardman (1991). Despite this, the problem continues to affect UK households in the millions.

After twenty years of national policy, a missed target to eradicate fuel poverty for vulnerable households by 2010 and all other households by 2016 (Defra and DTI, 2001), the introduction of a new measure (the Low Income High Cost Indicator), and a new strategy in 2015, a large body of research exists with the overarching aim to

develop a better understanding of how best to tackle the issue. In the broadest sense, the work in this thesis is situated here.

More specifically, however, this research is focused on an area of policy and practice rooted in "one important part of the package of efforts required for action" (Simcock *et al.*'s, 2014, p.2) in alleviating fuel poverty: energy-related advice and support. The decision to focus the research in this area was twofold. Firstly, it was motivated by professional experience as an advisor outside of academia supporting those living through and responding to challenges associated with fuel poverty and other issues. Secondly, as a result of a previous postgraduate degree at the intersection of social policy and fuel poverty, there was an awareness that in research and policy energy advice provision was underexplored and, as has been argued (Boardman, 2016), undervalued.

Until 2012, energy advice was a more stable feature of fuel poverty alleviation with energy advice centres across England and Wales funded by the Government and delivered by Energy Saving Trust (Centre for Sustainable Energy, 2020). Since, however, local provision has declined. The current energy advice landscape is patchy, difficult to map and dependent on insecure funding (Centre for Sustainable Energy, 2020). Schemes and services are provided formally at national levels and in more localised capacities, delivered by a range of actors including statutory bodies, local authorities, energy suppliers, community groups and organisations, among others. Much of this has migrated to being delivered online or by telephone, despite numerous studies (see for example Reeves, 2016; Barnes *et al.*, 2014) indicating the value of face-to-face advice, particularly through home visits, often in terms of providing effective means of support to some of the most vulnerable households. Research has highlighted that typically households in the greatest need of support are the ones not

accessing it (Snell *et al.,* 2018; Scottish Government, 2020). Additionally, there is no standardisation of energy advice, so the methods, purpose and evaluation of delivery can vary widely and, much like data relating to what provision exists and where, is not readily available in the public domain.

This means that much of the work in this area is likely to be hidden from policy and research, meaning that identifying and sharing best practice, as well as responding to key challenges, is difficult, if not impossible. While this illustrates a limited understanding of the extent, process and value of formalised energy advice and support, arguably even less is known about the distinct and interrelated role of informal sources, settings and styles of energy-related advice and support. A particular gap in the evidence concerns the role of informal others, such as relatives, friends and neighbours (Middlemiss *et al,* 2019; Hargreaves & Middlemiss, 2020) who are regarded as a trusted source of support, often more readily available or easily accessible. It is here, more specifically, that the present research contributes to the existing literature, examining the experiences of energy vulnerability and related advice and support within and beyond formal energy advice services with a view to developing a bottom-up framing as to how effectiveness can be understood.

1.2 Purpose and nature of the study

The purpose of this study, as noted, is to contribute to the limited evidence base exploring the role of energy-related advice and support in the context of tackling fuel poverty. Situated within phenomenological psychology, it focuses on the lived experience of energy vulnerability and related advice and support, within and beyond the formal energy advice organisation, as well as the perceptions of key factors considered to shape or hinder how effectiveness is understood in this context.

Theorising energy-related advice and support through the lens of Goldsmith's (2004) Communication Model of Advice, the research argues for this mechanism of tackling fuel poverty to be characterised less as a process of definable inputs and measurable outputs, and more as a social process, where contexts, perceptions of self, and relations with others play critical roles.

Formulated from a review of policy, practice, and theoretical perspectives in the study of advice, identifying gaps in the existing evidence, four research questions were formulated and used to guide the research design and analysis:

1. How do people experience advice and support for energy-related problems?
2. What role do other actors play across formal and informal settings?
3. What shapes and hinders effectiveness of energy advice and support across formal and informal settings?
4. How is the relationship between the formal and informal in the context of energy-related advice and support understood, and what are the implications for policy and practice?

A qualitative phenomenological methodology is employed, guided by the principles of phenomenological psychology. Utilising this methodological approach, the research provides an empirical contribution to a rapidly growing evidence base in the field of social policy where the notion of 'lived experience' has been mobilised to examine, as in this research, how experiences are shaped and mediated by policies, practice and process related to key social issues. In this case, relating to fuel poverty and more broadly the experiences of energy vulnerability. Twenty-four in-depth semi-structured interviews were completed with energy advisors and householders working and living in the North West of England: a part of the UK that a disproportionately high levels of fuel poverty (BEIS, 2020), but a relatively higher level of energy advice provision

(Centre for Sustainable Energy, 2020). The analysis, structured around three overarching themes, presents a bottom-up framing of how effectiveness is understood in relation to *problems*, *people* and *process*. More specifically, drawn from the experiential accounts of the interviewees, it characterises effective energy-related advice and support as that which: (1) works with 'tellable' energy problems, (2) acknowledge key relations and identities, and (3) evaluates the process in terms of the ways in which it is considered meaningful, situated, and purposive.

1.3 Structure of this thesis

The thesis is set out over eight chapters, beginning with the brief introduction to the main aspects of the research here in **Chapter One**.

Chapter Two details a more in-depth review of the policy and practice context in relation to the study. Set across two parts, the focus at first in on the wider social policy context, introducing fuel poverty as a recognised social problem and discussing the impact of this in the UK context. The second part of the chapter adopts a narrower lens to introduce the more specific focus in this research - the role of energy-related advice and support – and situates this as an underexplored, undervalued, yet critical part of the package of efforts to tackle fuel poverty.

Developing a theoretically informed approach to the study of advice is the focus in **Chapter Three** which reviews, at first, broader theoretical approaches found in strands of social cognitive psychology, network theories, and language-based or interactional studies. Following this, the discussion returns to energy, examining the relevance of conceptual and theoretical work centred on energy literacy, 'know how', expertise, and knowledge networks. Context is brought to the fore here as a key element featuring

across much of the theoretical work, and consequently of relevance in the research design in the present study.

In **Chapter Four** the focus turns to research approach adopted. This chapter, again set across two parts, first outlines the methodological framework of the study and situates the work as rooted in phenomenological psychology. It then discusses the methods or 'techniques' (Kothari, 2004) used to undertake fieldwork and the approach adopted to analyse the data – drawing on the principle of narrative-thematic analysis – is also set out here.

The next three chapters, Chapters Five, Six and Seven, detail the findings of the research which aims to develop a better understanding of the lived experience of energy advice and support, the role of social relations, framings and factors involved in determining effectiveness, and the distinct and interrelated role of informal sources, settings and styles of advice. Utilising an approach rooted in phenomenological psychology the research argues that effectiveness is understood in practical, informational and emotional terms, and can be located at the intersection of three areas around which the findings chapters are structured:

- Working with tellable energy problems (**Chapter Five**)
- Acknowledging key roles and relations (**Chapter Six**)
- Examining *effectiveness* as that which is meaningful, situated and rhetorical (**Chapter Seven**)

The thesis is concluded in **Chapter Eight**, which provides a summary of the main findings, a consideration of the research's strengths and limitations, as well as a discussion of the key contributions.

Chapter Two: Fixing the Problem of Fuel Poverty: The Role of Energy Advice

2.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the focal point of the research – energy-related advice and support – and situates this within the wider context of fuel poverty, a key area of social policy. Focusing on the UK context, in which the research set out in this thesis is based, it begins by detailing how the 'problem' of fuel poverty is understood, measured and tackled. The concept of energy vulnerability is introduced as a useful frame for moving away from a binary understanding of fuel poverty, enabling a more fluid and flexible exploration of households' experiences of living in or at risk of fuel poverty. The chapter then provides an overview of the policy context in relation to energy-related advice and support in the UK. Drawing on the literature, it situates energy advice as a key element in the wider package of approaches to tackling fuel poverty, yet one which is undervalued, underexplored and, to date, has received little to no policy recognition. Characteristics of effectiveness are then considered, which brings the attention to the specific focus of this research: how effectiveness is understood by those with direct experiences of energy-related advice and support.

2.2 Understanding the problem of Fuel Poverty

2.2.1 Fuel Poverty as a Social Policy issue in the UK

The oil crisis of the 1970s is said to mark the beginning of 'the modern era' of global energy policy (Helm, 1990) and energy conservation (Gupta, 2007). With consequences for the cost of domestic fuel in the West (i.e., gas and electricity), it is also widely regarded as the starting point for the 'present prominence of fuel poverty'

(Boardman, 1991): a social issue that negatively impacts the lives of millions of UK households, and one that centres on, in a broad sense, the use of and access to energy and the everyday services made possible through energy supply in our domestic life.

With energy supply and energy services so closely tied to our ability, or a lack thereof, to sustain adequate comfort, health and wellbeing in the home, fuel poverty has long been understood as a concern for social policy. Some of the earliest academic commentary from the field emerged in the decade following the oil crisis, and while claims were not being made to position fuel poverty as a new phenomenon, the foundations for recognition of it as a distinct social issue warranting in-depth examination and action were called for:

> "Social problems associated with fuel had no doubt existed before the autumn of 1973, but it was not until these events that they emerged from being a marginal aspect of the wider problem of poverty to become a major social issue in their own right." (Bradshaw, 1983, p.1)

In the UK, the negative impacts felt by domestic energy consumers at the time and in the years that followed were closely linked to the government's decision to allow energy prices to fluctuate, often suddenly and unexpectedly, in line with costs (Boardman, 1991). In a period of just four years, this resulted in a 15% increase in real terms (Osbaldeston, 1984), with the most detrimental impacts unsurprisingly experienced by the poorest households where fuel expenditure already consumed a large proportion of the household budget (Boardman, 1991). State subsidised support for heating costs reflected the extent of the challenge at the time where the number of claims made for such forms of financial help as much as trebled (Osbaldeston, 1984). This is a situation that has remained relatively unchanged with unpredictable, high

and/or rising energy costs extensively cited out as one of the three key drivers or causes of fuel poverty.

Early work examining the struggle to afford adequate energy services at the time looked at mounting energy debts and consequent disconnection of supply, noting that the majority of those disconnected could be categorised as high-risk, low-income households (Berthound, 1981). In what has been said to be one of the earliest uses of the term in the literature (Liddell et al., 2012), a paper by Isherwood and Hancock in 1979 set out to identify 'the victims of fuel poverty', elucidating, for the first time, characteristics of households considered 'at risk'. Using figures from the 1977 Family Expenditure Survey, specifically determining fuel poverty as where expenditure of fuel costs was twice that of the median, the research outlined those most 'at risk' were low-income households, particularly low-income retired households, those using solid fuel, and those without central heating. Other research at the time expanded upon this to also include low-income households with children, principally lone parent households (Richardson, 1980, as cited in Osbaldeston, 1984). At the same time, the relationship between energy and householder health and wellbeing also began to garner attention, with hypothermia among older households one of the first aspects to be explored (Wicks, 1978).

Bringing together this small but emerging body of research, and making the case for the fuel poverty as distinct form of poverty in its own right and as an issue for social policy and social justice, Bradshaw and Harris published 'Energy and Social Policy' (1983): a collection of papers exploring (a) the 'problems' of fuel poverty (i.e. fuel debt, disconnection, cold homes and health) and (b) reflections on policies either already in place, under development or required to respond to such problems. Adopting

Townsend's (1979) definition of relative poverty, it was in this publication that the first definition of fuel poverty was put forward:

> "Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in <u>fuel</u> poverty when they lack the resources to obtain <u>the reasonably warm and well-lit homes</u> which are customary, or at least widely encouraged or approved in the societies to which they belong." (Bradshaw, 1984, p.3, emphasis in original)

Fundamental to understanding the 'problem of fuel poverty' then was and continues to be a need to consider whether and to what extent it is a concern for social policy in terms of being a matter requiring state intervention, and/or one that depends upon individual action. Essentially asking what needs to change to address fuel poverty and who is responsible for those changes? Take for example, the prominence of damp and mould in rented homes across the private and social housing sectors: a sign of poorly ventilated, energy inefficient properties (the responsibility or fault of the landlord), but also a household malady that can be attributed to undesirable and problematic daily practices with heating and laundry (the responsibility or fault of the individual householder). As with many aspects of fuel poverty, such as this, the required action and responsibility is far from clear cut. In unpicking the multifaceted 'problems of fuel poverty' back in 1983 and what this means, Bradshaw (1983) outlined:

> "…[it] is not entirely or mainly one of feckless or extravagant consumption. It is also a problem of people trying to maintain minimal levels of comfort with expensive equipment or in badly insulated dwellings, or it is a problem of people spending little on fuel but because their incomes are low it takes a disproportionate part of their budget" (p.4).

This illustrates the many factors that are at play in efforts to understand or tackle fuel poverty from a social policy perspective positioning it as an issue requiring cross-sectoral approaches and acceptance that there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Everyday consumption of energy and associated energy services and practices, householder comfort, health, and wellbeing poor dwelling fabric, systems, equipment, and costs, unaffordability, and low incomes, all feature extensively across academic, policy and practice discourses (see for example: Mould & Baker, 2017; Ambrose & Marchand, 2017; Middlemiss & Gillard, 2015; Anderson, White & Finney, 2012; Liddell *et al.*, 2010).

Considering the limitations of approaches that call for greater weighting on a demand for individual action (i.e., a dominant focus on behaviour change), Bradshaw and Hutton (1984) highlighted several points. Firstly, while to some extent individual action at the householder level is needed, there must remain an awareness that not all individuals will be able to act to the same extent and in the same way, whether due to personal, household and/or financial circumstances. Secondly, energy consumption and cost are largely determined by factors outside of an individual's control, whether through the decisions made by housing providers, planners, architects, the fuel industries, and Government, among myriad others. Thirdly, as evidenced in the early work of Wicks (1978) and many scholars since (Liddell & Morris, 2010; Healy, 2017; Marmot, 2012), living in fuel poverty has detrimental impacts on health, and this positions the deleterious impact of unhealthy housing on householder health as a key social policy issue.

Much of this dichotomy between the structural and the individual, and its importance for shaping policy and practice, is still evident today across energy, environmental and fuel poverty policy, with the role of social sciences and social theory central to the

debate. The two dominant paradigms typically situated at either side are behavioural economics (rooted in behavioural psychology) and social practice theory (emanating from sociology). The first considers "individuals to be subject to systematic bias…[who] may be 'benevolently nudged' towards policy goals such as reduced energy consumption" (Hampton & Adams, 2018, p.214). Criticism of this approach from those adopting the latter - practice theory – has argued that systems and structures in the social world go unchallenged and unexamined when the focus is solely on how interventions can modify or shift individual behaviour. Instead of the individual being the unit of analysis, as Hampton and Adams (2018) point out, social practices – embedded in structures, processes, relationships and networks - become the focal point of analysis. Underlining the critique of individualistic approaches to tackling energy-related social issues, including fuel poverty, they outline that "Even if individuals were motivated through a variety of nudges to change their behaviours, there are myriad socio-technical structures that inhibit behaviour change" (Hampton & Adams, 2018, p.214). This perspective is important for understanding energy and fuel poverty policy where over the last decade in the UK this has been dominantly directed by behavioural change models, driven forward following the establishment of the Behavioural Insights Team (as well as other policy areas such as health, education, crime and finance). In relation to climate change specifically, but of relevance to fuel poverty policy also, Shove laments the current policy lens as one fixated on the "problem of human behaviour" and "incapable of moving beyond the ABC – this being an account of social change in which "A" stands for attitude, "B" for behaviour and "C" for choice" (2010, p.2). This links closely to critiques of technical-rational models and approaches in individual and social-cognitive psychology (Brown, 2013).

Considering the focus of this research - energy-related advice and support and how its role is understood in the alleviation of fuel poverty – this provides valuable insight and a key starting point. In examining the policy context, reviewing the literature and detailing the methodology and research design, the prominence of individual behaviour against social structures, processes, relationships and networks will be a critical consideration throughout.

2.2.2 What is Fuel Poverty?

Fuel poverty can be understood broadly as a social issue centred on the use of and access to (or lack thereof) energy and the everyday services made possible through energy supply in our domestic life. It has been described as "a social problem that affects the poor, with its roots in the quality of the housing stock and the cost of fuel" (Boardman, 2013, p.1) and there are three commonly noted key drivers of the issue: low incomes, energy inefficient housing, and high or unaffordable energy costs.

As detailed in Table 2.1 below, analysis from the UK Government in 2018 highlights the stark disparities between fuel poor and non-fuel poor households in terms of these three key drivers:

	Fuel poor	**Non-fuel poor**	**All households**
Median income	£10,325	£24,050	£22,017
Median fuel costs	£1,366	£1,140	£1,177
Median FPEER*	59.15	65.22	64.48
Median SAP**	57.37	64.72	63.95

Table 2.1: Disparities in fuel poverty according to the three key drivers[1]

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[1] Adapted from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy's 'Annual Fuel Poverty Statistics' report (2018, p.4). Reporting from 2019 and 2020 has not provided the same comparison of data between fuel poor and non-fuel poor; as such, this is the most recent comparative data.

Discussions surrounding whether fuel poverty constitutes a form of poverty in its own right or should be understood as a subset of poverty more broadly continue to feature in academic and policy discussions beyond the early work of Bradshaw and Hutton in 1983. Crossley, Garthwaite and Patrick (2019), for instance, have signalled that the fragmentation of poverty in the UK may detract from a focus on the wider determinants of resource distribution and income inequality. In response, Middlemiss and Simcock (2019) highlight that while, in the case of energy (or fuel poverty), it is not possible to entirely untangle one form the other, there are "important conceptual, political and practical benefits" (para. 6) to making a distinction in the framing of the two.

Boardman's (2013) position on the 'causes' of fuel poverty has offered clarity on this distinction, outlining that while low-incomes and higher than average fuel costs are recognised contributory factors, both can also be experienced by non-fuel poor households. Therefore, the distinguishing characteristic of fuel poverty is the significance of the energy inefficient home: "*as a consequence, the home is expensive to heat and so some of the poorest people have to buy the most expensive warmth*" (Boardman, 2013, p.xv).

Traditionally, and indeed still evident in much of the literature today, fuel poverty is described in this way, as a situation in which a household cannot afford to adequately *heat* the home at a reasonable cost. This is understandable as more than half of residential energy supply is used for space heating (Shorrock & Utley, 2003), and relatedly, many policy initiatives or campaigns are targeted towards improving thermal

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FPEER denotes fuel poverty energy-efficiency rating (0-100 with 100 signifying the highest level of energy efficiency).

**SAP* denotes 'The Standard Assessment Procedure' (SAP) and is the methodology used by the Government to assess and compare the energy and environmental performance of dwellings.

comfort in the home. Linked to this, the negative impacts of cold housing specifically (although wider causes are typically also explored) on poor physical and mental health have been extensively documented (Liddell & Morris, 2010; Marmot & Bell, 2013; Healy, 2017; Sherriff, 2017). A further subset of this framing, and documenting the most severe consequences, is the reporting of how a proportion of excess winter deaths – a measure of how many more deaths occur in winter compared to other months – can be attributed to living in fuel poverty (Guertler & Smith, 2018). In 2020, Office for National Statistics figures reported this figure – the number of excess deaths attributable to cold homes – at 8,500 – 20% higher than the previous year[2] and a figure expected to rise in coming years (National Energy Action, 2020).

This focus has arguably resulted in a commonplace 'old and cold' portrayal of fuel poverty predominantly characterised by inadequate heating and life in a cold home. In more recent years, however, this limited perspective has been expanded upon through a broader conceptualisation of fuel poverty, where it has been defined as: "a condition in which a household lacks a socially- and materially-necessitated level of energy services in the home" (Buzar, 2007, p.1909). Reframing or widening the focus in terms of 'energy services' opens up the space to consider domestic energy deprivation beyond inadequate heating, considering for example, the effects of inadequate lighting, the inability to cook or store food, as well as the impacts on socialisation, both face-to-face and through electronic devices. Beyond the UK, this can also be linked to increasingly more exploration of thermal comfort as not only a struggle to keep warm (framing fuel poverty as an something experienced only in colder climates), but also

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[2] Figures adjusted to account for COVID-19 deaths – see https://www.nea.org.uk/news/271120-01/?parent=advance-search

in terms of keeping cool (see for example: Day, Walker & Simcock, 2016; Sherriff *et al.*, 2019; Sánchez, Mavrogianni & González, 2017; Bouzarovski & Petrova, 2015).

2.2.3 Who are the 'fuel poor'?

According to UK-wide estimates[3], fuel poverty affects as many as 3.5 million households (National Energy Action, 2017). Across Europe, some 34 million households have struggled to keep warm at home (European Commission, 2020), but this figure could be as high as 125 million households ((Atanasiu, Kontonasiou & Mariottini, 2014). In England, where the present research is based, 10.3% of households are estimated to be living in fuel poverty which equates to roughly 2.4 million households (BEIS, 2020).

Based on UK government statistics, certain factors related to dwelling and household characteristics indicate a greater propensity to be living in fuel poverty (BEIS, 2020). Older properties (particularly those built before 1965) have the highest levels of fuel poverty, as do those with uninsulated solid walls. Households in rural areas have consistently been found to have the greatest levels of fuel poverty - attributed in part to the fact that properties are substantially more likely to be isolated, and not connected to the gas network. In terms of housing tenure, proportionately the private rented sector is performing the worst, with one in five privately rented households living in fuel poverty. Household composition is another indicator, with the greatest levels of fuel poverty found among single parent households, a finding that has been consistent since 2003, and houses in multiple occupation. Unsurprisingly, given that it is one of the key determinants, fuel poverty disproportionately effects those on the lowest

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[3] Fuel poverty is a devolved matter, with each nation in the UK having its own policy target, measurement and outputs. (BEIS, 2018)

household incomes, and consequently unemployed and economically inactive households are more likely to be fuel poor. A more recent trend, however, has revealed that among the fuel poor population, almost half are in employment (Howard, 2015); a finding that is also reflected in the increases of in-work poverty more broadly (Innes, 2020).

Considering the work of Isherwood and Hancock in 1979, many of the 'victims of fuel poverty', such as lone parents, those using solid fuel, and low income households, represent the same demographic groups today as they did forty years ago. However, while national statistics are valuable in enabling the classification of 'at risk' groups, which, for example, play a key role in effectively targeting support, research has endeavoured to highlight the heterogeneity of different groups, noting the limitations of approaches that adopt a one size fits all way of tackling the fuel poverty (Butler & Sherriff, 2017). Simply put, no two 'fuel poor' households will have dealt with precisely the same arising issues, they are unlikely to be living with the same housing condition, and as is the focus of this research, they are highly unlikely to have had access to the same advice, support, or information. Nonetheless, commonalities in shared experiences do allow for meaningful conclusions, not generalisations, to be drawn (MacIntosh & Wright, 2018).

Despite a need to acknowledge difference within 'at risk' groups, understanding demographic differences in those more or most likely to be experiencing fuel poverty is critical for the effective design and delivery of fuel poverty policy, as well as providing direction for research and the targeting and framing of advice and support. Effective targeting (identifying relevant households) is a central element to the efficient delivery of fuel poverty policies, including the provision of related advice and support. It ensures

forms of support reach those most in need and aims to do so in the least costly way possible.

2.2.4 Measuring Fuel Poverty: Eradication to alleviation

Instrumental in the UK's first Fuel Poverty Strategy, introduced in 2001, the work of Brenda Boardman (1991), and the introduction of the 10% measure, is regarded as transforming fuel poverty into "a widely recognised societal challenge among key academic, practitioner and policy-making circles" (Bouzarovski, Petrova & Tirado-Herrero, 2014, p.1). Targets set out in the UK's first Fuel Poverty Strategy aimed to eradicate the issue for all households by 2016, with interim targets set to ensure that there were no vulnerable fuel poor households by 2010, and no fuel poor households within the social housing sector by 2012 (DEFRA, 2003). Ten years after the strategy was published, fuel poverty remained a significant challenge, estimating that as many as four million households were still classified as 'fuel poor' (Hills, 2012). In part, this prompted the Department for Energy and Climate Change, the government department then responsible for overseeing fuel poverty policy, to commission an independent review. Commencing in 2011, the review set out to investigate the nature of fuel poverty, its impacts and causes, and, most importantly, to establish the efficacy of the existing definition (i.e., the 10 percent indicator) (Hills, 2012).

Resulting from the review was a revised definition of fuel poverty – from the 10% indicator to the Low Income High Cost measure – which has since been introduced as the official definition in England[4], and implemented within the current fuel poverty

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[4] In the devolved administrations of Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, the devolved governments continue to utilise the 10% measure (NEA, 2014).

strategy (DECC, 2015a). This measure is now used in policy to analyse and report annual statistics (BEIS, 2017a).

Under the Low Income High Cost indicator, a household is considered to be experiencing fuel poverty if:

- they have required fuel costs that are above average (the national median level),
- and, if they were to spend that amount, they would be left with a residual income below the official poverty line (DECC, 2015b).

The Low Income High Cost indicator, unlike the 10% indicator, is a relative measure that uses national median levels of income and energy costs to determine which households are classified as fuel poor. The measure is said to go further than its predecessor by not only accounting for the number of fuel poor households, but also allowing a consideration of the 'depth' of the issue, through using what is termed the 'fuel poverty gap' which assesses "how much more fuel poor households need to spend to keep warm compared to typical households" (DECC, 2015a, p.16).

As well as introducing a measure that can assess both the number of households living in fuel poverty and the 'depth' of fuel poverty experienced by those households, the Hills Review (2012) has also been highly commended for its efforts to reassert the seriousness of the social issue, the urgency required in dealing with it, and in reaffirming its distinction as a form of poverty in its own right (Moore *et al.*, 2012). Additional praise has been voiced for its achievements in documenting a continued recognition of the impact on physical and mental health, general wellbeing, and premature mortality, as well as maintaining a position that demands capital investment in energy efficiency remain at the centre of future action (Moore *et al.*, 2012).

Despite the commendations noted above, the introduction of the Low Income High Cost indicator has faced criticism. The process by which energy costs are calculated within the measure has come under scrutiny, with critics questioning whether 'median energy costs' in fact represents what may be considered reasonable for many different households: "the Hills Review fails to adequately consider whether these households can keep their homes warm at 'reasonable' cost" (Moore *et al.*, 2012, p.19). Considering the complexities of the new approach to measuring fuel poverty, Moore *et al.* (2012) highlights that under the Low Income High Cost indicator as many as 700,000 households would no longer be classed as fuel poor, with the only change being the way in which the issue is measured.

Beyond more focused issues with the measure itself, a broader criticism can be levelled at the 'politics of fuel poverty' (Middlemiss, 2017) between 2010 and 2015, the period in which the Low Income High Cost was introduced. This is particularly in terms of the revised targets set out in the new strategy where, with a specific focus on energy efficiency, the goal is: 'to ensure that as many fuel poor homes as is reasonably practicable achieve a minimum energy efficiency rating of Band C, by 2030' (DECC, 2015a). With a target guided by 'as far as is practicable', the most notable change with policy and political discourse surrounding fuel poverty can, therefore, be understood as a shift from eradication to alleviation: "The austerity maxim of 'helping those most in need' is threaded through this new politics, belying an acceptance that not all fuel poverty can be alleviated" (Middlemiss, 2017, p.425). As such, it has been argued that this new politics is merely 'symbolic' with little expectation that it will make a meaningful positive difference in the lives of those experiencing fuel poverty (Middlemiss, 2017).

2.2.5 Reframing Fuel Poverty through Energy Vulnerability

As highlighted in the previous section, developing the 'right' measure for fuel poverty is a significant challenge and a topic that has consumed much of the literature. Analyses from the likes of Moore et al. (2012) and Middlemiss (2017) begin to uncover the particular problems arising from a disconnect between objective formalised national measures of the issue and the subjective experiences of it.

This is reflected in more recent research, where it has been argued that the present body of work examining the nature of fuel poverty has drawn too heavily on statistical representations of the issue (i.e., the fuel poverty gap), demonstrating a tendency to draw upon definitions only in terms of 'macro-level indicators' (Middlemiss & Gillard, 2015). As such, valuable insights gained from a growing body of rich and subjective qualitative research remain largely absent from both academic and policy debate (Lusambili, Tod, Homer, Abbott, Cooke, & McDaid, 2011; Harrington *et al.*, 2005; Middlemiss & Gillard, 2013; Middlemiss & Gillard, 2015). Efforts to reframe fuel poverty through terms such as 'energy vulnerability' (Bouzarovski, 2013; Middlemiss & Gillard, 2013, Middlemiss *at al.,* 2018; Butler & Sherriff, 2017) have, however, worked to strengthen the position of qualitative work within the field, highlighting the importance of understanding the changing nature of the issue and how this is experienced from the perspectives of the fuel poor themselves.

In this section, the concept of 'energy vulnerability' – adopted within the research detailed in this thesis - is introduced. Maintaining a critical focus on the lived experience of fuel poverty, the concept of energy vulnerability is considered to have the "potential to open up a more complex and dynamic understanding of people's relationship with energy" (Middlemiss & Gillard, 2015, p.146). Drawing on wider vulnerability literature, Middlemiss and Gillard (2015) outline that 'energy vulnerability'

can be understood as "…the likelihood of a household being subject to fuel poverty, the sensitivity of that household to fuel poverty, and the capacity that household has to adapt to changes in fuel poverty" (2015, p.147).

A major strength of this approach, as noted in previous research (Butler & Sherriff, 2017), is that it allows the experiences of fuel poverty to be explored not as a fixed state – for example, where a household either is or isn't fuel poor – but instead considers the varying degrees of vulnerability to fuel poverty in terms of "exposure, sensitivity and adaptive capacity" (Middlemiss & Gillard, 2015, p.147). Bouzarovski *et al.* (2013) outlines how the traditional "binary thinking embedded in the current UK fuel poverty and energy efficiency policies" (p.8) might not provide the most appropriate framework or definition from which to enhance the current understanding. Instead, acknowledging a more fluid approach, which appreciates the changing nature of fuel poverty, may result in more effectively targeted support and resultingly a move closer towards achieving the measures set out in the new fuel poverty strategy. With regards to the overarching policy perspective, Hills (2012) highlights that adopting a less fixed or rigid understanding of the issue may be more sensible and realistic:

> "Being relatively relaxed about the fact that some people on the wrong side of a given threshold may receive assistance makes even more sense when one considers the reality that people's situations change frequently over time, for example as they move in or out of employment, as they have children, or as they move home" (Hills, 2012, p.71).

At a fundamental level, the present research can be seen to demonstrate similarities to that of Middlemiss and Gillard's (2015) whereby a bottom-up approach is adopted with a specific focus on the lived experience (discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four) of energy vulnerability and energy-related advice and support. In this way, the

concept of energy vulnerability, which regards fuel poverty not necessarily as a rigid household state but as a changing and flexible issue, has the potential to offer a broader conceptual framework from which to draw.

2.3 Fixing Fuel Poverty

2.3.1 Main policy approaches

Legislation passed in 2014 set a new fuel poverty target for England that aimed to "improve as many fuel poor homes as is reasonably practicable to a minimum energy efficiency rating of Band C, by the end of 2030" (BEIS, 2020, p.7). There are several key policies in place in efforts to reach the targets set out in the 2015 Fuel Poverty Strategy and they centre around the dominant drivers of the issue, working to reduce the cost burden of energy and energy efficiency of the home.

The three main policies at present include the Energy Company Obligation (ECO), Warm Home Discount (WHD) and the Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards (MEES) for landlord in the private rented sector (BEIS, 2020). Some elements of these key policies have seen significant advancement toward alleviating fuel poverty. For example, ECO, considered the main policy for tackling fuel poverty, involves energy suppliers delivering energy efficiency programmes, and this scheme has improved more than two million homes (BEIS, 2020). Further, revisions to the scheme mean that since 2018, it has been almost entirely focused on low income and vulnerable households – those more likely to be experiencing fuel poverty. In 2015, a focus on 'affordable warmth' accounted for a mere 30% of the scheme. The WHD, a well-known fuel poverty policy, which provides £140 energy bill rebates, again reaches more than two million households, in this case annually not overall, and benefits low income and vulnerable households exclusively. Lastly, is policy focused on the private rented

sector, where statistical trends have shown residents to be disproportionately more likely to experience fuel poverty than other tenures. MEES, a policy introduced in 2018, requires landlords who are issuing new and renewed tenancies to ensure their properties achieve a minimum standard of energy efficiency.

However, despite some successes, there are a number of criticisms of existing policy, namely that it doesn't go far enough, whether in terms of regulatory requirements of landlords, eligibility for accessing energy bill rebates, the amount of funding available for schemes, targeting inefficiencies, and overall time frames. The Committee on Fuel Poverty (2020), an advisory non-departmental public body, for instance, has highlighted how only 15% of the £2.5 billion budget for these policies is received by those experiencing fuel poverty. Energy efficiency measures, in the Committee's view, must be prioritised, as at present this only accounts for 20% of the budgets spend; the rest being used for fuel bill assistance.

Considering energy-related advice and support, particularly in examining the work of energy advice services as investigated in this research, access to these policy functions, particularly the WHD, is a common element of work undertaken by energy advisors in supporting households experiencing energy vulnerability. Experiences of accessing and connecting households to the schemes set out in these policies, through energy-related advice and support, will be discussed in Chapters Five, Six and Seven which sets out the research findings.

2.3.2 Energy advice as 'part of the package'

There are many approaches to supporting those living in or at risk of fuel poverty and, considering the dominant drivers of the issue, strategies as experienced by the household may involve efforts to improve the energy efficiency of the home (i.e.,

insulation), steps to reduce energy consumption (through behavioural change) or the cost of energy bills (for example by switching energy provider), or methods to maximise household income (through debt consolidation or benefit checking).

Fundamentally, however, all approaches require a certain level of knowledge – a level of 'know how' or 'know what' - regarding the issue and awareness of the potential solutions. This is where energy-related advice and support comes in. Indeed, as Simcock et al. (2013) note in their work examining the supportive role of community networks, this "is one important part of the package of elements required" (p.2). Areas of energy-related knowledge that could lead to the alleviation of fuel poverty and its impacts are diverse, complex and often interlinked. Examples can include eligibility for and access to grants for physical measures in the home, strategies for using less energy or using energy more efficiently, income maximisation, greater engagement with the energy market (i.e., through switching), better understanding of energy billing, as well as methods for dealing with energy-related issues, such as damp or mould. And, as Darby (2003) noted, there is a huge range of possible sources where individuals might access such information or advice:

> "Millions of householders never ask for advice, yet they learn something from random sources: friends, neighbours, the mass media, labels, Do-It-yourself, instructions and chance events. There has been little research into the nature of this learning, still less what might be done to improve it" (p.1225)

While at the core of energy advice is the exchange of energy-related knowledge or information, it is also important to acknowledge – as will be documented throughout this work – that energy advice as a process involves much more in the way of support that solely the exchange of energy-related knowledge and information, also involving for example, practical support (for instance, showing someone how to operate a

heating system) and emotional support (for example, in hearing and sharing the details of the difficult realities of life for those living in fuel poverty).

In terms of energy and fuel poverty policy, it has been noted that energy-related advice and support has often been overlooked, with commentators suggesting that a key issue relates to the perception that such an approach is understood to be a softer, complimentary, nice-to-have, but perhaps not essential measure in overall efforts to alleviate fuel poverty. Evidence (see Stockton *et al.*, 2018), particularly in more recent years, has challenged this, and it is here in part that this thesis intends to make a contribution: adding to the evidence base that illustrates the value of energy-related advice and support in tackling fuel poverty.

One key study highlighting the critical role of energy advice and support can be found in the evaluation of the large scale £26.2 million Health and Innovation programme which aimed to bring affordable warmth to fuel poor and otherwise vulnerable households. Services that form part of delivering large-scale programmes of physical measures (i.e., advice and support) should be seen, as Stockton *et al.* (2018) highlight, as essential, not secondary. This should include aftercare and follow, and critically in the context of advice and support, provision in place for when things go wrong, for example, in challenging an energy bill. The study highlighted the importance of delivering good quality, timely and multifaceted advice at multiple points, and that this should be embedded in programmes delivered as part of fuel poverty policy (Stockton *et al.*, 2018). This sentiment was echoed by Boardman in commentary on the fuel poverty policy landscape in 2016:

> "Advice workers in the community struggle to keep funded. They are trusted and have detailed knowledge of their local areas which allows them to provide effective, targeted help. They do essential work with the fuel poor by visiting them

in their homes. The value of this has not been recognised in official policy as the asset it is" (Boardman, 2016, p.2)

While the focus in this thesis is on energy advice as a means of alleviating the negative experiences and consequences of fuel poverty or energy vulnerability, what Sunderland (2017) has termed 'energy advice for energy poverty alleviation', the delivery of such advice is also considered a fundamental aspect to other aspects of energy policy, such as Net Zero and the low carbon transition. Sunderland (2017) notes that energy advice is a core part of "…any effective sustainable energy strategy to better empower consumers", with 'good energy advice' seen to have the power to "motivate and enable consumers to install energy efficiency measures, purchase energy efficient products, and change behaviour." (SErENADE, 2007) and is an 'essential accompaniment' delivered in combination with other policy tools and mechanisms.

2.3.3 Energy advice at the policy level

Energy-related advice provision in formalised settings (e.g., via energy advice agencies and organisations) is a highly sought-after source of support. In a review of the energy advice landscape, Klein (2015) estimated that more than 800,000 requests for energy advice were made by domestic consumers in the UK in 2014 alone, with a further 42,000 consumers seeking advice and support regarding energy complaints: the latter representing a fourfold increase in only three years. In 2020 against the backdrop of COVID-19, significant impacts to household income and debt are expected to result in a rapid and sizeable increase to the demand for advice services, including energy advice (Broman, Sage & Bridgeman, 2020).

Alongside this demand, the last decade has seen considerable change in terms of national-level consumer services in the UK, including those for energy consumers, particularly in terms of the organisations and bodies with overall responsibility for the regulation and delivery of advice and redress. In terms of UK policy and legislative frameworks surrounding energy, the Consumers, Estate Agents and Redress Act (2007) is particularly significant with regards to changes to the 'energy advice landscape' (Klein, 2015). With a focus on consumer complaints handling, as well as advice provision, the Act also set out amendments to the regulatory standards and processes for dealing with energy consumer complaints - one way in which organisations have and continue to provide advice and support to energy consumers. Relating to the 'energy advice landscape', the Act resulted in two key changes. The first saw Consumer Direct, a national generic consumer helpline, take over the responsibility for energy advice provision nationally, as well as being responsible for referrals and signposting to other relevant support. The second change saw the creation of Consumer Focus, an executive non-departmental public body within government, whose responsibilities specifically included handling cases from vulnerable energy consumers. Delivered within the Extra Help Unit (EHU) - a telephone-based service provided by a specialist team of caseworkers – this branch of support for vulnerable energy consumers continues today (delivered by Citizens Advice Scotland).

In 2010, one of the commitments set out in the Queen's Speech stated that: "the cost of bureaucracy and the number of public bodies will be reduced" (Klein, 2015, p.9). This resulted in steps being taken to streamline the delivery of consumer services in the UK, including energy advice provision, aiming to reduce complexity around advice, advocacy and enforcement; strengthen the 'frontline of consumer empowerment';

simplify existing models and frameworks; and build services that are more cost-effective and consistent (Klein, 2015). In an effort to meet this commitment, what followed was the majority of central government funding for information, advice, advocacy and enforcement being transferred to just two national bodies: Trading Standards and the Citizens Advice Service, both of which were regarded as having "high recognition and trust among the public" (BIS, 2011).

Specific roles and responsibilities that were transferred to the national Citizens Advice Service included that of national-level consumer advice and information (transferred specifically to the Citizens Advice Consumer Service from Consumer Direct in 2012), as well as the function of statutory consumer watchdog for energy consumers (transferred from Consumer Focus in 2014). Such large-scale changes and shifts in the roles and responsibilities related to energy advice and statutory regulation, presents a timely opportunity to examine the existing context of energy advice and develop recommendations for the future of service delivery.

2.3.4 Energy Advice provision

While the above section outlines some of the key features of policy and legislative frameworks within which national-level energy advice provision, and consumer services more broadly, operate, this does not, however, provide much insight into what 'energy advice' in the UK looks like and how it operates.

Mapping current energy advice provision in the UK is challenging. The landscape is patchy and provision a devolved matter, meaning variations of service across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are in place. Mostly, national schemes of provision are online or delivered by telephone, and in each nation are typically delivered by large energy advice agencies, such as Home Energy Scotland, Energy

Saving Trust, Citizens Advice (Warren & Foulds, 2020). Some elements of government-funded energy advice provision are UK-wide like the Simple energy Advice website, in place since 2018. In terms of more localised or specific energy advice provision, a range of other services can be found, including that provided by local authorities, energy suppliers, and a wide range of unofficial community-based schemes (Warren & Foulds, 2020) such as 'Energy Cafés' (Martiskainen *et al.*, 2018).

One reason why it is particularly difficult to map energy advice provision is that data related to energy advice provision more broadly is not readily available in the public domain. As Klein's (2015) review noted, a centralised repository of information does not exist, and this leads to "challenges in aggregating or comparing organisations" (p.6). However, as Klein (2015) concludes, "these deficits in publicly available information are themselves an important finding" (p.6).

Another reason relates to the fact that in many cases, and perhaps more often than not, energy advice will not be provided in isolation to other forms of advice (for example, with complex and multifaceted issues related to household debt, income maximisation, housing issues, etc.). Many advice organisations, including Citizens Advice, offer a more holistic service that will work to prioritise clients' issues and respond to them accordingly. Given the messiness of everyday challenges that prompt people to seek advice, such as the loss of employment or the onset of a health condition, operationally, such services are designed to be able to provide a package of support, not necessarily focusing on a single, specific issue. Advice services, therefore, are likely to operate either in this holistic way, but may not identify as an 'energy advice' service specifically, or provide a more specialist service, focusing on energy, where referrals from generalist teams and services are made. Forms of support – or types of advice - found in the sector span topics including money, debt,

housing, employment, health-focused, energy, and all-encompassing 'generalist' models of advice-giving.

Despite the challenges outlined above, a literature review and scoping exercise with relevant stakeholders, undertaken by Klein (2015), is able to provide some indication of what energy advice provision across the UK looks like. The review identified twelve major energy advice schemes, delivered predominantly by seven advice providers, as well as a number of smaller organisations (Klein, 2015). Seven organisations are based in England and include four that are specifically tailored to address the needs of vulnerable consumers. This includes four national helpline services and two face-to-face services, with one being an outreach service. Extending beyond provision for vulnerable consumers, there is also a national helpline focused on helping people to secure the 'best energy deal', another national helpline that helps consumers better understand how to reduce their energy use, and, lastly, a smaller national helpline that provides advice regarding energy generation.

It is important to note that the actual scope of energy advice provision in the UK may in fact be much broader than is presented here. As noted, Klein's (2015) review relied on literature searches and contact with key stakeholders, in the absence of a central database of operating organisations and services. In addition, only advice services with a primary focus on energy were included. Furthermore, this 'map' of energy advice provision in the UK only includes those services which are taxpayer or mandated consumer funded. The limitations to this review make it likely that many smaller, localised, more holistic, or non-government funded organisations are also contributing to the overall provision of energy advice in the UK. This also supports the view that mapping energy advice provision is fraught with difficulties. As Warren & Foulds notes:

"...energy advice in England is provided by a patchwork of different organisations with different priorities, audiences, and techniques. UK government-funded advice in England is generally reactive and low-involvement, rather than more proactive and high-involvement." (Warren & Foulds, 2020, p.15)

2.3.5 What is energy advice?

Despite a multitude of programmes designed to disseminate domestic energy information, there is a notable dearth of academic literature focused specifically on the process of energy advice (Simcock et al., 2013). This is particularly evident in more recent years. Nonetheless, as will be discussed here, valuable insights into the processes and experiences of energy advice (see for example Green et al., 1998; Darby, 1999; Boardman & Darby, 2000) can be found.

In one of the earliest studies of energy advice, Green et al. (1998) defined the process as: "that which is specific to individuals and their circumstances, with the aims of improving energy efficiency, comfort and the ability of a household to achieve affordable warmth" (p.3). Expanding upon this, and marking a distinction between energy advice and information provision, Darby (1999) states that:

"The specificity of advice is what distinguishes it from information, promotional activities or education. This implies two-way communication between advisor and client (usually the householder) in order to make clear what the client's priorities and circumstances are. It can be carried out face-to-face or over the phone, but not passively by sending literature only." (Darby, 1999, p.1)

This requirement of interactivity and a focus on individual circumstances is supported and expanded upon by research exploring the provision of advice across Europe. In

the 'Sharing Expertise Across Energy Advice in Europe' (SErENADE) project 'advice' was separated from other 'supporting activities', such as awareness raising, outreach, marketing, information provision, and education (Maby, Brain & Bull, 2007). As shown in the table below (Table 2.2), 'energy advice' is something that is again specific, not only in terms of its focus on a set of circumstances but also in terms of the solutions proposed, and a process that requires interaction between an advisor and an advisee.

Activity	Working Definition	Examples
Awareness-raising Outreach Marketing	Raising general awareness of and attracting attention to the issues. Methods for reaching the advice target group and bringing them into contact with advice providers.	Brief items in press and media; poster campaigns; events; competitions; flyers; websites; direct mailing; links with and referrals from other services; contact with community and trade groups.
Information	Explanation of problems and relevant actions with general applicability to any client	Leaflets; websites; factsheets; guidebooks.
Advice	Guidance on specific situation and actions that can be taken. Requires some level of interaction with client.	Interaction with client by telephone; interview at advice office or other venue; visit to home or business premises; advice stand at public events; written reports with specific recommendations.
Education	Interaction with client by telephone; interview at advice office or other venue; visit to home or business premises; advice stand at public events; written reports with specific recommendations.	Inclusion of sustainable energy in school or further education curricula; professional or vocational training; community-based adult education.

Table 2.2: The SErENADE model of energy advice and supporting activities (2007)

Citizens Advice, the statutory consumer body for energy consumers in Great Britain, sets out a typology for four different forms of energy advice (Citizens Advice, 2017). This includes: (1) reducing energy costs; (2) consuming energy services; (3) reducing

energy demand and improving effectiveness of energy used; and (4) increasing incomes. In a study of energy advice among the hardest-to-reach households, Ambrose *et al.* (2019) use this typology to outline two main ways in which the independent energy advice sector in the UK might be classified. The first (drawing on typology one and two above) involves energy advice provision focussing on switching and energy market issues; the second (drawing on the third typology) focuses on energy efficiency. Notably, the fourth typology – increasing incomes – is regarded as prevalent not only in specialist energy advice services, but also in the context of generalist advice more broadly. This, as highlighted in Chapter Two, points towards evidence where the overlap between energy or fuel and income poverty is clearer: increasing incomes clearly addresses both.

A common theme emerging from this early work surrounds the notion that energy advice is best when given 'opportunistically' (at a time of change) and when 'client-led'. Darby (1999) highlights that 'client-led' energy advice is particularly effective in that it involves householders who are "already motivated to act" (Darby, 2003, p.1). Further supporting this position, and evidencing links to advice research more broadly (Fitzsimons, & Lehmann, 2004), Green et al. (1998) note that energy advice is less effective when unsolicited.

Linking to another critical aspect identified in the wider evidence base of 'advice' research, a number of studies of energy advice have outlined the significance of householder trust, overwhelmingly viewed as a critical factor determining success (Green et al., 1998; DECC, 2014; Darby, 2003). In addition to being trustworthy, studies were generally in agreement with what constitutes a 'good advisor', with Green et al. (1998) outlining key characteristics such as: "accessibility, friendliness, experience, good communication skills and knowledge of local community" (p.vi). A

number of the studies challenged the notion of 'effectiveness' (explored more broadly in earlier sections focused on the 'advice' literature) of energy advice where it might be regarded as one focused solely on energy demand reduction, emphasising a need to acknowledge other (positive) outcomes, such as improvements to householder health, wellbeing and comfort. Indeed, as found by Sherriff (2016) and Revell and Stanton (2017), energy advice (and/or the installation of energy efficiency measures) may in fact result in an increase in energy use. For households who may have been enduring conditions related to domestic energy deprivation (i.e., a cold home) for some time, for instance, the "…cost savings from improved energy performance can in turn encourage the householders to take up some of the benefit by increasing the demand temperature, a process known as the 'take-back factor' or the 'rebound effect'" (Hong et al., 2009, p.5).

Beyond a focus on households living in or at risk of fuel poverty, aspects of energy advice can be noted in other studies where the advice itself has not necessarily been the explicit focus. Some notable examples have included explorations of energy advice and the introduction of smart metering and technologies (Hargreaves, Nye & Burgess, 2010; Darby, 2010), national surveys of the perceptions of energy advice (Mahapatra, Nair & Gustavsson, 2011), and user-centric web applications for energy advice (Ford et al., 2014), among others.

A study by Reeves (2016) is of particular relevance to the present study given its focus on the role of localised, community-based energy advice organisations. Using a case study approach and involving twelve UK projects, the research aimed to identify how energy advice visits can be delivered effectively and what role community organisations play in delivering this support. Findings from focus group and interview data with representatives from the twelve organisations suggested that 'long-term,

local professional initiatives', which may be local-authority or charity led, were considered to be 'most effective' in supporting the fuel poor; however, as Reeves (2016) notes: "Community organisations appear to have some potential to fill gaps in local provision and can assist professional initiatives, particularly through signposting, but a lack of volunteer capacity ultimately constrains their impact" (p.1).

Overall, a major limitation of much of this evidence base is that it is mostly grounded in the perspectives of those providing advice, overlooking the experiences and perceptions of those being advised (Simcock et al., 2013). A study by Darby (2003), however, is an exception to this. Adopting a constructivist learning approach, which considers advice as a process of social learning (noted earlier), Darby's (2003) research involved a combination of observations of energy advice visits, as well as interviews with householders and energy advisors. Rejecting the predominant 'behaviourist' paradigm, a framework which underpins much of the energy literature, Darby's (2003) findings emphasised the significance of 'personal experience' and 'tacit knowledge' – both of which are brought to the social process of energy advice by householders and advisors. Concluding, Darby remarked on the importance of qualitative research, in addition to approaches which monitor or measure effects, in order to gain a better understanding what constitutes 'effective' energy advice: "we do not know without careful qualitative evaluation, what has been learned and whether it is likely to be productive" (Darby, 2003, p. 1225).

The studies discussed here have provided some insight into the process and practice of energy advice. While early studies have focused on energy advice in the context of fuel poverty, in more recent years this has been expanded upon to also investigate the 'effectiveness' of advice in the context of energy demand reduction, and other noted perspectives. As well as the effectiveness of the advice itself, much of the literature

has also focused on what makes an individual an effective energy advisor. As discussed, Darby's (1999; 2003) work is particularly relevant here with its focus on personal experience and tacit knowledge to explore more broadly the role of energy-related knowledge and social learning.

2.3.6 What makes energy advice and support effective?

As well as attempting to 'map' current energy advice provision, the review by Klein (2015) set out to develop a framework for assessing the effectiveness of energy advice in the UK. The analysis indicated that 'collective performance' is generally poor, with many consumer-needs not being met. Particularly, this concerned more specialist provision on a number of issues, including debt/financial assistance advice, especially face-to-face advice; long-term provision and practical support; outreach services; specialist, tariff-specific and technical advice for vulnerable consumers; and support for energy advisors to ensure advice provision remains up-to-date and accurate (Klein, 2015). Suggested areas for improvement surround how 'responsive and future proof' an advice organisation is, as well as the level of transparency and accountability it holds.

What determines 'good', 'quality' or 'effective' advice has been the focus of a number of policy-led publications (see for example: Klein, 2015; DECC, 2012; DECC 2014; George *et al.,* 2007; Consumer Focus, 2011; OPM, 2014). Klein's (2015) review outlined that, from the consumers' perspective, energy advice in a formalised capacity should be:

- available in different styles and formats

- comprehensive and accurate

- proactive in terms of supporting the most in need

- offering practical support

- independent from energy suppliers

- free

Maby *et al.* (2007) note that effective provision has the potential to achieve "sustainable energy objectives, to motivate and enable consumers to install energy efficiency measures, purchase energy efficient products, and change behaviour" (p.1). Within the context of fuel poverty, and more generally where energy advice provision is focused on vulnerable energy consumers, the Bonfield Review (2017) suggests that quality depends upon a range of factors. This includes being able to establish the 'right' engagement with consumers, providing understandable information, and ensuring that intermediaries and the advice they provide can be trusted. Essentially, this perspective emphasises that the consumers' expectations and needs should remain central in the design and implementation of energy advice provision. This approach is one which is also being championed at the EU level and seen as playing a role in achieving EU climate targets (Energy Advice Exchange, 2016).

Research which has set out to determine the 'effectiveness' or 'value' of energy advice has typically adopted an evaluative lens, where inputs (energy advice) are measured against outputs (responsiveness to advice, usually in terms of a change in behaviour) (see for example George *et al.*, 2007; Consumer Focus, 2011; OPM, 2014; Klein, 2015). Evaluative in nature, such analyses have generally aimed to explore the value of the advice and support against a set of aims and objective for a particular service or scheme, often using quantitative data and statistical analyses to measure aspects such as satisfaction with advice or money saved as a result of bill reduction. This evaluative work is highly important as many advice services face considerable funding

challenges and rely on such evidence to demonstrate to a wider audience (specifically funders) the value of the service they provide.

It has been argued, however, that such approaches offer only a limited understanding of the value of energy-related advice and support; one that overlooks interpretative, perceptual and experiential processes, as well as an individual's prior knowledge, and the social, historical and cultural contexts in which advice takes place (see for example Simcock et al., 2013 and Darby, 1999; 2003). Furthermore, as Novikova et al. (2011) highlight: "although it may not lead to immediate action, qualified advice creates a culture of energy knowledge and know-how through learning that takes place between individuals" (p.14). Therefore, approaches, such as that adopted in the present research, which seek to generate a better understanding of advice as a social process and what this means in terms of everyday experiences of advice, and advice uptake, as well as the social actors, relationships and networks involved, will work to strengthen and broaden the existing evidence base.

2.4 Chapter summary

This chapter has introduced the contextual backdrop to the study in relation to policy and practice in the UK. It begins with an introduction more broadly to fuel poverty, a recognised social issue that has been the subject of research and policy in the UK for more than three decades. The way in which fuel poverty is understood, measured, and tackled is outlined, and this is discussed in relation to the concept of energy vulnerability, which is adopted in this research.

The second part of the chapter draws focus to energy advice and support as one part of the package of measures required to alleviate fuel poverty, albeit one which, to date, has been relatively underexplored, and, as Boardman (2016) argues, undervalued in

policy. The chapter conclude by considering research which has explored the characteristics of effectiveness. This brings the attention to the specific focus of the research set out here: how effectiveness is understood by those with direct experiences of energy-related advice and support.

Chapter Three: Theorising and Conceptualising 'Advice'

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter set out the contextual backdrop to the research. It has introduced fuel poverty as a social issue and positioned the role of energy advice within the context of this wider social problem. Having provided this background to energy-related advice and support, from what might be deemed a policy or practice perspective, the focus will now turn towards the academic literature to explores the relevance of research that has examined the process and characteristics of advice from a broader range of theoretically informed perspectives, disciplines and paradigms. This will be brought together to introduce Goldsmith's (2004) Communication Model of Advice (CMoA), the predominant theoretical framework utilised in the analysis of this study. The chapter then returns the focus to energy advice, considering concepts such as energy-related know-how, energy expertise and knowledge networks play a role in theorising energy-related advice and support. Concluding this chapter will be a more detailed consideration of key developments in the research related to context – a critical element that features across much of the literature. It does so by considering two contexts which, alongside formalised energy advice provision, have as yet been underexplored in the evidence base and which have informed the research design of the present study: the 'mundane' and 'online'.

3.2 Developing a theoretically informed understanding of 'advice'

A key component of this research is that it is a study of 'advice' – a process regarded as "a significant form of interpersonal interaction, with implications for most domains of human life" (MacGeorge, Feng & Guntzviller, 2016a, p.35). Commenting on this sense of ubiquity, Shaw (2012) notes that:

"Giving advice is a pervasive action in everyday life. We see it in institutional settings, where professionals are called on specifically to give advice on matters, they are specialised in. We see advice at the centrepiece of the popular 'self-help' book in modern society; within television programmes and radio shows; springing up in newspaper and magazine articles and within internet forums. We also see it weaving its way in and out of the very heart of our social existence, where people interact with each other in everyday encounters." (Shaw, 2012, p.1)

This sense of advice as a pervasive yet mundane everyday aspect of social life highlighted the need to consider a broader understanding of what advice is as an underlying practice or process. As the following sections will now discuss, this prompted a turn to the wider 'advice' literature to consider various ways in which research has explored the phenomenon, in discipline, method and theory.

3.2.1 Cognitive psychological studies of advice

As a process by which individuals are able to support and influence one another, it is unsurprising that advice represents a particularly interesting topic for disciplines within the social sciences, including strands of psychology (Shaw, 2012). MacGeorge, Feng and Guntzviller (2016a) describe the psychological paradigm of advice research as focused on "cognitive and emotional processes that affect the use of advice, especially when making decisions" (p.14-15). With an emphasis on decision-making (regarded as a cognitive process) and the decision-maker (often adopting a rational-choice model), advice is typically conceptualised as an 'input' which is presented to an individual who is then required to make a decision. Studies largely employ quantitative methods in experimental designs, and one of the most prominent concepts developed from this body of work is the Judge-Advisor System (JAS; see Bonaccio and Dalal,

2006 for a review). In what Bonaccio and Dalal (2006) term a 'prototypical' advice study, the JAS assigns research participants to the role of 'judge' who then make decisions based on information presented by the 'advisor'. Often in the form of computerised tasks, using a typically absent and fictitious, researcher-created advisor, decision-making tends to be 'intellective' (MacGeorge, Feng & Guntzviller, 2016a) – where there is an accepted correct response – while the form of 'advice' mostly constitutes a specific or numerical value (Shaw, 2012). In such studies, participants tend to complete concrete tasks, such as: estimating people's weights (Tost et al., 2012), answering multiple choice questions about computers (Van Swol & Sniezek, 2005), and responding to questions about historical events (Yaniv & Kleniberger, 2000; Gino, 2008).

This specificity of advice, in terms of there being a single, precise, and correct answer, immediately questions the appropriateness of drawing comparisons between such studies (undertaken in artificial experimental settings) and understandings of energy-related advice in naturalistic everyday settings. For example, for a low-income household dealing with an energy debt, there is unlikely to be a single, precise and correct answer – instead, a number of 'advice' options, often complex in nature and in terms of the action required, are typically presented (e.g., ways of maximising household income; applications for grants to clear part or all of the debt; regular and affordable payment plans; switching tariff, supplier or payment method). Furthermore, such studies are based on assumptions about individual actions, attitudes and behaviours, rooted in technical-rational models (Judson & Maller, 2014) where individuals and their decisions can be isolated as reasoned, goal-oriented, and free form the influence of emotions and social life (Wilson, Crane & Chryssochoidis, 2015).

A central theoretical debate found in this body of research concerns advice utilisation (i.e., whether or not an individual has been influenced to 'use' the advice given). While these studies tend to be situated within technical-rational models, where, as discussed above social processes, embodied experiences and structures are typically overlooked, research findings in relation to advice utilisation do bear some relevance. Further, although the present study is not focused on measuring 'energy' advice utilisation, it is reasonable to expect certain aspects of positive or negative influence and impact will emerge when talking to individuals about their experiences. Developing more effective strategies for engaging with fuel poor households is a high priority for both research and policy. Illustrating the extent of the challenge in the context of alleviating fuel poverty specifically, certain initiatives have found as many as one in five households refuse energy efficiency advice and/or subsequent measures, even after multiple points of contact (Boardman, 2013).

Considering cognitive psychological studies of advice-giving then, underutilisation may be explained by a number of factors (see for example, Yaniv, 2004). Explanations have included: 'anchoring', an attachment to one's own opinion; 'differential information', where greater weighting is placed on one's own opinion compared to that of the advisor; the 'egocentric bias', where individuals perceive themselves to be more knowledgeable and thus discount the advice given; and, 'distance effects', where the further away from the initial opinion advice is the less weighting it is given (Yaniv, 2004, as cited in MacGeorge, Feng & Guntzviller, 2016a; Gino, 2008). What these findings highlight, in terms of advice-related decision-making, is the importance of recognising that attitudes, opinions and existing skills and knowledge are all brought to the moment at which advice is given – an aspect that has been acknowledged more overtly in other research, particularly where social learning and constructivist approaches to (energy)

advice have been adopted (as discussed later in this section, for example, Darby, 2003, Catney *et al.*, 2013).

While the above explanations focus on recipients' opinions in relation to the advice being given, other factors impacting advice utilisation have been found. For example, Gino (2008) explored the 'paid-advice effect' concluding that individuals assign greater weighting and are more receptive to advice when it is paid for. This has obvious implications when considering advice activity within the context of (energy) hardship and poverty, where if household (energy) costs are already unaffordable, paid-for advice related to dealing with such costs is understandably impractical. Further, as Klein (2015) identified, one expectation of 'energy advice' is that it is free to access. Interestingly, however, the theoretical frame drawn upon in Gino's research – the 'sunk-cost fallacy' - extends beyond financial costs, suggesting that where there has been a significant investment - of money, time or effort - an individual will more persistently pursue a goal (Arkes & Blumer, 1985). A cautious view of this should be taken with regards to the uptake of energy-related advice (as noted earlier, see Boardman, 2013), as placing the emphasis on the householder and what they have or have not invested, and therefore risks overlooking the everyday challenges and complexities related to dealing with the causes and consequences of energy vulnerability. For a household living in or at risk of fuel poverty, there may simply not be the money, time or effort available to seek out and act upon energy advice.

Trustworthiness represents another influential factor in advice utilisation (Sniezek & Van Swol, 2001; Bonaccio & Dalal, 2006; Van Swol, 2011); an aspect that has also been discussed extensively in energy and fuel poverty research (Green *et al.*, 1998; Darby, 2003; Basham *et al.*, 2004; DECC, 2014), as noted in the previous chapter. Findings suggest that greater trust tends to be placed in local, community

organisations, as well as in members of an individual's immediate interpersonal network such as family and friends, while energy companies are more typically regarded with discontent, cynicism and mistrust (DECC, 2014). In the wider context of advice-giving, Bonaccio and Dalal (2006) characterise trust as when the advisor is perceived to be an 'expert' and 'well-intentioned'. Other studies have drawn out the link between trust and expertise, also considering levels of confidence, and have similarly concluded that perceived relative expertise influences advice utilisation (Harvey & Fischer, 1997; Zagenczyk & Murrell, 2009). Although the present study is not concerned with measuring the extent to which energy advice is 'used', trust, expertise, and to some extent confidence, are all regarded as key aspects in understanding how individuals make sense of energy vulnerability and how this is communicated in energy advice.

Aside from expertise and trust, cognitive psychological studies of advice have identified other influential factors in advice recipients' decision-making when it comes to choosing an advisor (Cross & Sproull, 2004; Reid *et al.,* 2010; MacGeorge, Feng & Guntzviller, 2016a). As well as the characteristics of the advisors themselves, the task at hand and the context of advice are also important (MacGeorge, Feng & Guntzviller, 2016a). As such, studies have shown that 'advisor selection' can be influenced by a range of factors including: the type of problem (Heyden *et al.*, 2013), perceived relative status of the advisor (Cross & Sproull, 2004), perceived similarity to oneself as the advice-seeker (McDonald & Westphal, 2003), and the availability and accessibility of formalised advice sources (Reid *et al.*, 2010). Much of this work focuses on high-level business or managerial contexts, such as advice-giving between company chief executives (broadly situated within the organisational sciences); however, a study by Reid *et al.* (2010) is an exception. Using a qualitative methodology, grandmothers'

perceptions of their roles in supporting new families, with a focus on breastfeeding practices, were explored. Findings revealed that participants would turn towards advice that could be easily accessed, often resulting in the 'advisor' role being assumed by a relative or a friend, instead of a professional. Understanding accessibility of different advice sources in the context of energy advice-seeking will be an important factor in the present study, particularly in terms of how people talk about their decisions to seek advice within or beyond a formal advice setting.

As this section has highlighted, the predominant focus in cognitive psychological studies of advice has been on identifying various factors influencing an individual's decision whether or not to take up advice. The activity of advice-giving and -seeking, and the experience of participating in advice, receive little attention within this work, as do the varied and complex reasons why people seek out or provide advice. The evidence is additionally rooted in assumptions about human behaviour that is based on technical-rational models, which have been critiqued for providing a "remarkably simplistic model of behaviour" (Carrico *et al.*, 2011, p.61). Further, the majority of studies are undertaken in experimental settings, where the advice given, and the advisors are fictitiously created by the researcher. Considering the limitations of this evidence base also in terms of context, the findings are often related to specific organisational or business settings, with far less exploration of the everyday nature of advice or advice-giving in community-based organisations, as with the present study. As MacGeorge, Feng and Guntzviller (2016a) state, this paradigm offers a limited understanding of advice-giving, particularly in terms of seeing the phenomenon as a social process where interactions, relationships, place and experiences of advice have been mostly overlooked.

3.2.2 Exploring network theories

Another area of focus within advice research has centred on networks of advising relationships, predominately situated within social network research and drawing from network theories (Cross & Sproull, 2004; Creswick, & Westbrook, 2010; Vargas & Schafer, 2013; Lomi *et al.*, 2013). Described as the study of social structures and the relationships between structures (Chung, Hossain & Davis, 2005), social network research can be broadly categorised as adopting one of two approaches: sociocentric or egocentric. A sociocentric or 'whole network' approach generally involves the "quantification of relationships between people within a defined group" (Chung, Hossain & Davis, 2005, p.1). The focus, therefore, is on measuring structural patterns within a network, which seeks to explain key factors such as where power and resources are concentrated. An egocentric approach, on the other hand, focuses on the individual, asking research participants about their personal networks and the effects that such relationships with others has.

Briefly considering advice research that has utilised sociocentric approaches, MacGeorge, Feng and Guntzviller (2016a) note that typically the aim is to 'model' an entire advice network using 'specialised analytical techniques' (p.19). The boundaries of an advice network are often determined by the organisation or context being studied, and participants are asked, commonly using questionnaires, to identify all points of contact related to advice activity. Following analysis, intricate network diagrams are created to demonstrate visually the structure of a network, outlining links between individuals, who are referred to as 'nodes'.

One focus within sociocentric approaches to advice network research centres on understanding network formation. MacGeorge, Feng & Guntzviller (2016a) outline that advice network formation is predominantly motivated in two ways: (1) "individuals'

desire to improve their social status (relative social position)" and (2) a "desire to access social capital (resources available through others)" (p.19). In contrast to much of the cognitive psychological research on advice, where the focus is almost explicitly on the individual advice-seeker, this conceptual approach moves closer towards a consideration of perspectives of both the advice-giver and the advice recipient. For example, using social network analysis, Agneessens and Wittek (2012) conclude that giving advice has the potential to enhance one's status or prestige (as an advice-giver), whereas the opposite might be said for those seeking advice. The second driver of advice network formation, social capital, which is a widely drawn upon theoretical frame within network research (Burt, 2000), relates to the assumption that individuals will invest in social relations in order to access valuable resources. In the case of advice-giving and -seeking, this specifically pertains to relevant knowledge and information.

As well as theoretical explanations for network formation, advice network research has explored other factors that play a key role in understanding advising relationships, focusing on two concepts in particular: 'advice centrality' and 'network density' (MacGeorge, Feng & Guntzviller, 2016a). While both aspects concentrate on measuring frequency within an advice network, centrality is concerned with the number of times an individual is identified as a source of advice (i.e., which network members are identified as predominant advice-givers), while network density refers to the number of ties within a given advice network (i.e., how big/small is the network and how strong/weak are the ties between network members). Regarding centrality, advice network studies reveal a number of similarities in the conclusions drawn to those found in cognitive psychological studies of 'advisor selection'. For example, individuals with 'task-relevant' expertise are more likely to be sought after for advice (Keith et al.,

2010), as are network members perceived to be similar or 'structurally equivalent' (Copeland, Reynolds, & Burton, 2008). Regarding network density, the number of ties between network members, research has focused on how network structures impact upon outcomes for network members (MacGeorge, Feng and Guntzviller, 2016a). Notably, a positive association between density and 'group or team effectiveness' has been found (Wang et al., 2014). Despite the arguably ambiguous and objective use of the term 'effectiveness', which is likely to vary significantly across different contexts of advice activity, these findings suggest that to some extent a more connected network may result in more positive outcomes for members. Considering this in the context of energy vulnerability or fuel poverty, an acknowledgement of this benefit can be seen in research and policy initiatives that aim to 'reach the hard to reach' or build more effective methods of engaging with households.

Another important aspect related to the structural components of an advice network is the potential role and impact of sub-networks. In a study by Lomi *et al.* (2013), for example, social network analysis was used to investigate 'advice ties' or relations within and between different 'sub-units' (i.e., departments) across an organisation as a whole. The research explored the extent to which 'members' of the network identified with the sub-units, termed 'local foci', compared to the organisation more broadly, defined as a 'global focus', as well as the relationship these ties have with patterns of advice seeking. Findings revealed that for individuals who identify more strongly within particular 'sub-units' advice seeking tends to be restricted to these 'local' settings, whereas individuals "who identify strongly with a global focus…tend to be sources of advice across the boundaries of the local foci in which they participate" (Lomi *et al.*, 2013, p.1). What this suggests is that understanding perceptions of 'network' membership, for instance at 'local' and 'global' levels, may be important in order to

better understand how advice networks form, as well as advice seeking patterns and the relationships between individuals within such networks.

The second tradition in social network research, as introduced earlier, is the egocentric approach. Distinct from sociocentric approaches, in this approach the networks surrounding individuals are the focus, and researchers aim to make generalisations about features of these connections (i.e., personal networks) rather than the 'whole society' (Chung Hossain & Davis, 2005). Instead of whole networks being represented by 'nodes', each single participant is referred to as the 'ego' - considered the central point of a network. Data is most commonly collected by asking participants to list members of their network – referred to as 'alters' – however, as with sociocentric approaches, this is typically through a process of 'free recall' (Chung Hossain & Davis, 2005). The major difference with this approach is that the researcher is interested only in the 'ego' and thus network members' data is generally not collected.

In advice network research, studies adopting an egocentric approach are typically concerned with advice activity across an individual's interpersonal network, whether this constitutes formal contacts, such as colleagues, or informal contacts, such as friends or family members. Research has suggested that at times there is overlap between the formal and informal, for instance between advice and friendship networks (Noy & Jabbour, 2017). In the present study, the possibility of overlap – whether between roles, advice-giving and advice-seeking, or the context in which advice activity may have occurred – is an important consideration.

In addition to listing network members, egocentric network studies ask participants to provide an account of the qualities and behaviours of individuals who have given them advice. Consequently, this approach has commonly been used to examine behaviours related to 'advisor selection'. One study by Cross and Sproull (2004) investigated

advisor selection through what they termed 'information relationships'. The research aimed to explore how advice (or information) seeking within an 'information relationship' results in 'actionable knowledge', defined as effective knowledge exchange related to short-term progress or success. Beginning to unpack the complexity of advice processes, they suggest that individuals cultivate different advice or 'information relationships' in relation to five components of actionable knowledge: "(1) solutions (both know-what and know-how), (2) referrals (pointers to other people or databases), (3) problem reformulation, (4) validation, and (5) legitimation" (Cross and Sproull, 2004, p.446). In relation to the limitations of advice research discussed thus far, this model begins to address the more heterogenous aspects of advice activity and advising roles, where, in other words, different types of problems may require different forms of knowledge and therefore can result in multiple and differing advice relationships.

Taking steps to expand on the often-limited focus on one aspect of advice, as in previous studies, it is worth here considering the five components of actionable knowledge proposed by Cross and Sproull (2004) in more detail. The first component, 'solutions', makes a critical distinction between procedural and declarative knowledge in advice activity. Termed 'know-how' (procedural knowledge) and 'know-what' (declarative knowledge), the study found that sources perceived to provide the most effective knowledge were overwhelmingly those offering the former rather than the latter. In terms of referrals, effective sources were identified as those who also offered the names of other contacts potentially able to help; this combined method of giving advice and signposting to other relevant sources is commonly adopted as an advisor with Citizens Advice. The third component, 'problem reformulation', illustrates how value is ascribed to sources who are able to "shape the seeker's problem, as well as

to point out consequences and anticipate issues" (Cross & Sproull, 2004, p.1). Validation, the fourth component, highlights the importance of imparting confidence in understanding a presented problem, as well as being able to make a persuasive case. In the context of energy vulnerability, such influence or support may be evident, for example, in individuals feeling able to deal with their energy suppliers and problems with their energy bills – feeling more confident to make contact and discuss the problem at hand. The fifth and final component, legitimation, refers to how advice sources demonstrate their acceptance of proposed approaches, and how multiple sources, or information relationships, may be used to arrive at this position. Although Cross and Sproull (2004; 2006) consider this within the context of business decision-making, processes of seeking legitimation in the context of energy advice and energy vulnerability have been noted within the literature (Butler & Sherriff, 2017).

Research adopting an egocentric approach has also directed some attention towards advice-giving - an area that compared to advice-seeking behaviours and decision-making has received far less attention. Focusing on what they term the 'distribution of advice', Vargas and Schafer (2013), for example, examined individuals' social networks to investigate how certain characteristics may or may not influence the likelihood of advice-giving. Specifically, the focus in this study was on 'interactional diversity', relating to the heterogeneity of individuals' social networks. 'Socially meaningful' network characteristics that were accounted for included race, class, religion, family structure, and sexual orientation. Findings supported the hypothesis in demonstrating that "greater interactional diversity is positively associated with advice-giving, whether the target is stranger, neighbour, close friend, or family member" (p.1). As well as offering a valuable contribution to the literature on the 'unanticipated benefits of diversity in modern society', these findings are also of relevance to the

present research. This is particularly with regard to advice-giving beyond formal settings (i.e., the advice organisation), where it may be important to consider characteristics of informal advice networks not only in terms of density, as discussed, but also in terms of diversity. How individuals experience informal advice-seeking is unlikely to be restricted to close and generally homogenous networks of family and friends, and this will be an important consideration in both data generation and analysis. Furthermore, in fuel poverty research specifically, this poses questions with regards to whether or not the density and diversity of advice networks impact upon the level of advice-giving. For example, differences related to the density and diversity of energy advice networks may be more significant across rural and urban contexts.

Having discussed some of the main features of social network approaches to advice research, in method and theory, it is now useful to consider some of the strengths and limitations of this paradigm in relation to the present study. In agreement with Chung, Hossain and Davis (2005), a major strength of social network approaches, whether sociocentric or egocentric, is that they "can be used to identify knowledge flows such as who do people seek information and knowledge from?" and "Who do they share their information and knowledge with?" (p.2). This potential to uncover or make visible certain networks of advising relationships has obvious benefits to the study of fuel poverty or energy vulnerability where, as noted, a high priority for energy research and policy is to better understand how best to identify and engage meaningfully with householders. Beyond formalised records maintained by organisations who may have supported a number of fuel poor households, little is documented about these wider and perhaps more informal social relations or networks. In this regard, social network analysis offers a unique methodological approach to not only visualise but also

investigate the social structures and relations that centre around households living in or at risk of fuel poverty.

As with cognitive-psychological studies, however, the major limitation of this approach is that there is little or no focus on the experience of advice or the interaction itself. In other words, what advice looks like, how it is experienced, as well as the sorts of issues brought forward, are not aspects that such studies set out to better understand. Much of which relates to the lived reality and the policy context in which this social process takes place. Instead, the overarching aim is typically to investigate connections between individuals, seeking to build a clearer picture of a network as a whole or that which surrounds an individual. As a result, it became clear that such approaches have a very fixed focus and are therefore not well-suited to research which is interested in the lived experience of social issues, such as energy vulnerability, and how individuals make sense of such experiences when communicating with others. Methodologically, the common use of questionnaires and sampling approaches that bound participants responses and networks in an a priori manner is also a limitation in this regard. A further limitation of this work is that while network approaches have highlighted the utility of advice, an overwhelming focus is again centred on organisational or managerial contexts where the aim is typically to generate a better understanding of professional networks and associated behaviours.

3.2.3 Turning to 'language-based' and 'interactional' approaches

In linguistics and the philosophy of language, advice is defined as a 'directive' – a particular type of speech act, where language and communication are seen as performative and purposeful (Searle, 1969, as cited in Shaw, 2012). Shaw (2012) asserts, it is within this body of work that "advice itself takes centre stage" (p.4). In other words, according to Flor (2005), "directives are attempts to make the world

match the words" (p.168). Deriving from speech act theory (Searle, 1969), advice is seen as distinguishable from other 'directives', such as requests, in that is perceived as a communicative task which benefits the recipient and is, therefore, something delivered in their interest (Flor, 2005; Shaw, 2012).

In addition to speech act theory, the work of Brown and Levinson (1987) on 'politeness theory' is also recognised as having some of the earliest and most prominent influence on communicative or language-based studies of advice. In this theoretical framework, advice is seen as having the potential to be a 'face threatening act' (Shaw, 2012), where the "speaker is in some way intruding into the hearer's world by performing an act that concerns what the latter should do" (Flor, 2005, p.169). In this model, a distinction between negative and positive face is made. As MacGeorge, Feng and Guntzviller (2016a) outline, "advice has the potential to threaten 'negative face' when recipients perceive advice as 'butting in' and constraining autonomy, and 'positive face' when recipients perceive advice as implying a lack of knowledge or competence" (p.6). Much of the work building upon this theoretical contribution has focused on the messages being delivered in advice (the 'message paradigm'), how they are evaluated, and the style of advice delivery, to better understand how different advice outcomes may be related to 'face threat'. Studies have found, for instance, that where advice attends to the recipients' 'face needs' (Flor, 2005), it is perceived to be more 'sensitive, appropriate and effective' and results in the recipient being more responsive to the advice given (see for example Goldsmith, 2000; MacGeorge et al., 2004). Subsequent research has also examined the content features of advice drawing on theories of argumentation and persuasion, such as Social Judgement Theory (Sherif & Hoveland, 1961). Regarding advice as a process of social support and social influence, this work has demonstrated that:

"…recipients' evaluations of an advised action's efficacy, feasibility, and lack of limitations, and the extent to which advice confirms previously-intended behaviour, are positively associated with perceptions of advice quality, coping facilitation, and intention to implement the advised action" (see for example Feng, 2014; Feng & Burleson, 2008; MacGeorge *et al.*, 2013; as cited in MacGeorge, Feng & Guntzviller, 2016a).

Proposing a synthesis and expansion of theoretical discussion related to speech acts, politeness theory and content features of advice, Feng and MacGeorge (2010) put forward the model of Advice Response Theory, which focuses predominantly on the relationship between perceptions of advice and advice outcomes. Drawing from the wider body of literature which has contributed to the development of this theory, MacGeorge *et al.* (2016b) outline a number of basic claims. In terms of advice message *content* (as noted in the above quote), efficaciousness, feasibility, and perceptions of one's ability to act upon the advice are all important in determining the quality of an 'advice action', as well as coping, and likelihood of uptake. In addition, advice that is perceived as more polite is more likely to be acted on, as is advice that "confirms that a recipient's existing plan of action" (MacGeorge *et al.*, 2016b, p.212). In terms of the *source* of advice, advisor characteristics, such as expertise, trustworthiness, likeability, and similarity to the recipient are all critical.

In distinguishing this model from others that have set out to predict the effects of advisor characteristics or message content, MacGeorge *et al.* (2016b) emphasise that Advice Response Theory focuses on "the ways that advisor, message, and situational factors operate collectively and interactively, and have differential effects on a range of advice outcomes" (p.212). This collective and interactional focus on who is talking, what is being said, and the circumstances around such interactions, presents a more

dynamic model that moves closer towards the overarching aims and objectives of the present study. However, as with previously discussed 'advice' research, methodological limitations should again be noted. Firstly, as research exploring Advice Response Theory has been conducted within experimental laboratory settings, little is known about aspects of the model within naturally occurring advice interactions in everyday settings.

One model which does consider advice in a broader context of supportive interactions, and therefore extends beyond MacGeorge *et al.*'s (2016b) Advice Response Theory, is Feng's (2009) Integrated Model of Advice. Examining the "role of emotional support and problem analysis in preparing a distressed person to consider advice" (MacGeorge *et al.*, 2016b, p.8), Feng's (2009) model evidences a shift in the literature towards more conversational approaches to understanding advice. Although again utilising experimental methods, findings have noted the importance of stages or 'sequential moves' in advice-giving practice. Presenting supportive communication as a multistage process, Feng (2009) outlines the three stages or 'sequential moves' as: (1) emotional support, (2) problem inquiry and analysis, and (3) giving advice. This suggests that in supportive communication, important advice 'work' is done prior to the point at which advice is given. Considering that 'advice utilisation', as discussed earlier, is an important factor in both advice research more broadly and in understanding (energy) advice uptake more specifically, the sequential moves outlined in this model provide a useful framework for thinking about the more complex nature of the advice interaction beyond simply providing someone with information related to a problem. As such, considering aspects such as emotional work and how presented problems are analysed will be important to consider within the present study.

As noted, a separate (and extensive) body of 'advice' research has adopted conversational theory and related methodological and analytical approaches. Predominantly situated within the discourse paradigm, this body of work differs from much of that already discussed, whereby qualitative approaches are typically used, and the focus is more often on naturally-occurring advising interactions, rather than those created in experimental settings. Studies have explored the social organisation of advice interactions in a range of contexts, including telephone helplines (Hepburn *et al.*, 2014; Pudlinski, 2005; Hepburn & Potter, 2011), healthcare settings (Heritage & Sefi, 1992; Greatbatch *et al.*, 2005; Sarangi & Clarke, 2002), and educational settings (Vehviläinen, 2001; Waring, 2005). Although this work has largely focused on formal advice settings, some notable contributions to the literature have explored advice in mundane, everyday contexts (Jefferson & Lee, 1981, 1992; Shaw, 2012). MacGeorge, Feng and Guntzviller (2016a) note that "many conversation analyses of advice are informed by the same theories of identity, face, and politeness that have stimulated work in the message paradigm" (p.12); however, an exception can be found in Heritage's conceptual framework which utilises conversation analysis to explore how epistemic status is communicated by those seeking and those providing advice (Heritage, 2012).

While studies utilising conversation analysis and related approaches offer focused and detailed insights into the way in which language is used in advice, specifically in terms of how language unfolds in such interactions, as an approach it is fundamentally concerned with the way an interaction operates, rather than viewing the interaction as a "way of understanding people's views, experiences or life histories" (Sullivan, Gibson & Riley, 2012, p.137). MacGeorge, Feng and Guntzviller (2016a) note that another approach adopted within the discourse paradigm, which still maintains the focus on

the 'real-world enactment of advice' can be found in more interpretive approaches that examine "…the meaning(s) assigned to advice in different types of interactions, relationships, and cultures" (p.12). Principally focusing on advice as a form of supportive communication, studies have utilised a range of qualitative methods, such as ethnography and interviews (see for example, Gubrium & Holstein, 2008).

3.2.4 The Communication Model of Advice

A particularly relevant theoretical model within the discourse paradigm, and the central theoretical frame from which this research draws, can be found in the work of Goldsmith (2004), who proposes a 'Communication Model for Advice' (CMoA) where the effectiveness of enacted support (i.e., advice as a form of supportive communication) is characterised as that which is considered to be *meaningful*, *situated*, and *rhetorical*. By 'meaningful', Goldsmith describes how a supportive act (i.e., advice) must be interpreted and evaluated as such by not only participants in that support, but also by observers and researchers. In Goldsmith's view, "a communication approach focuses not on behaviours but on meaningful actions" (Goldsmith, 2004, p.31). Interpretation of what constitutes 'meaningful' is said to occur at two stages: the first in determining whether or not something is considered to be advice (or something else, such as expressions of concern, offers, jokes, criticisms, etc.) and the second, in evaluating such actions. Importantly, within this model social explanations for shared meaning are emphasised, which are said to stand apart from yet complement studies that have focused on individual cognitive in the interpretation and evaluation of advice.

Viewing enacted support as 'situated' brings context to the fore, highlighting how "the way that advice is given and interpreted, and the potential effects on the recipient, are likely to differ depending on the context in which it occurs" (Goldsmith, 2004, p.41).

This is an aspect that has been overlooked by much of the 'advice' literature, however, is one that is necessarily of critical importance to the present study. Considering the context in which enacted support takes place, as Goldsmith suggests, allows us to consider (plausible) meaning behind such action. For example, advice provided in a formal advice organisation will be delivered by an individual carrying out the requirements of their professional role, whereas that between friends or relatives will be motivated by different meanings and thus evaluated differently, also. A focus on context can be through a wider or narrower lens (see for example Tracy, 1998), with a wider lens focusing on sociocultural contexts, whereas a narrower lens might consider aspects such as the relationship between the advice giver and the recipient. Thirdly, enacted supported within Goldsmith's model regards advice as 'rhetorical'. Relating to rhetorical inquiry in communication studies and relating to the importance of viewing advice as situated, this aspect focuses on "features of a communicative performance that make it successful in achieving some purpose in a particular social context" (Goldsmith, 2004, p.45).

Developed from extensive empirical research over more than ten years, adopting both quantitative and qualitative approaches, Goldsmith's (2004, p.61) CMoA is rooted in four 'central tenets':

1. Advice has implications for identities and relationships that result in challenges and dilemmas

2. Advice is seen as more useful in some situations than others and, even in the same situation, some pieces of advice are seen as better than other pieces of advice.

3. Advice seen as honouring valued identities and relational qualities is seen as more effective than advice that undermines identities and relationships.

4. How advice is given contributes to its perceived helpfulness, sensitivity, and supportiveness.

Regarding the first component, Goldsmith notes that while earlier research has explored the challenge of advice resistance as being a consequence of face threat (as discussed, see Brown and Levinson, 1987), this work has left unanswered questions related to the multiple meanings and purposes of advice in different cultural, relational and conversational contexts. Using ethnographic methods and qualitative interviews to explore advice-giving in a university context, Goldsmith and Fitsch (1997) identified three dilemmas that advice presents to relationships and identities. These include being helpful versus butting in, being honest versus being supportive, and appearing autonomous and competent versus disrespectful and ungrateful. Considering the differences that may exist between formal and informal sources of energy advice specifically, it may be useful to understand if these dilemmas emerge, and if the context and purpose (i.e., formal or informal), are perceived as playing a role.

The second component focuses again on the situational nature of advice, however, in this regard relates to a required awareness of when advice may be appropriate, and what type of advice is appropriate for that situation. In the context of the present research, for instance, a formally trained advisor may find it easier or more appropriate to discuss changes to a households' approach to budgeting for energy costs, and indeed ask for more detailed information about one's income and outgoings, whereas advice on this topic with a friend or relative may seem inappropriate.

Somewhat related to the first component, the third tenet discusses how the effectiveness of advice is evaluated and, according to this model, this depends upon a recognition of salient identifies and relationships. Research supporting this component (for example, Goldsmith, 2000; Goldsmith & MacGeorge, 2000) has

predominantly utilised quantitative methodologies and drawn upon theories of face threat. Also drawing predominantly from face theory, the fourth component, highlighting the importance of *how* advice is given, acknowledges that "the same advice can be communicated in a variety of ways that imply different relationships between speaker and hearer and different identities for each partner" (Goldsmith, 2004, p.69).

In the previous sections, the discussion has explored the literature of 'advice' research beyond the social policy context of energy and fuel poverty. It has drawn from language-based or interactional approaches, to consider key findings and theoretical models where, as noted, "advice itself takes the centre stage" (Shaw, 2012, p.4). This work is much more closely aligned with the overarching aims and objectives of the present research, where an underlying focus is on advice as a form of supportive communication. Goldsmith's (2004) 'Communication Model of Advice' has been identified of particular relevance in understanding advice as meaningful action, as well as asserting the importance of identity, relationships, and context – all considered key aspects in the present inquiry. The following sections will not turn back to the topic of energy-related advice, considering conceptual work of relevance to understanding the role of knowledge, expertise and context in relation to energy vulnerability.

3.3 A pause: conceptualising advice as a social process

Having discussed various ways in which research has approached the study of advice, in method, theory, and in terms of the research paradigms within which this work broadly falls, it is worth reflecting at this point on how theoretical framings of advice might be understood. MacGeorge, Feng and Guntzviller (2016a) describe advice as a 'consequential interpersonal phenomenon' (p.3), which, in relation to the present

research, captures two important aspects: (1) that advice is essentially 'social', relating to communication and/or the relationships between individuals, and (2) in being consequential, it has an impact, serving some sort of purpose or function. While these aspects of understanding advice may be rather simplistic, keeping a sense of what advice 'is' – a social process - and what it 'does' has been helpful in thinking about what this means in the context of energy advice. This section, reflecting on key findings from the literature review, briefly considers a conceptualisation of advice in three ways: as a process of social influence, social support and social learning.

(a) Advice as social influence

Social influence has been described as the "ways in which a person's thoughts, their feelings and the ways in which they behave are influenced by other people or other groups" (Davey *et al.*, 2008, p.430). It is unsurprising then that one of the most common conceptualisations of advice is as a process by which one individual may influence another. This is noted in the assumption set out by Goldsmith (2004) that advice is 'rhetorical' in the sense that it is always attempting to achieve "some purpose in a particular social context" (2004, p.45). Taking 'advice following' as that rhetorical purpose, Copeland, Reynolds and Burton's (2008) provide a useful definition for thinking about advice as a process of social influence:

> "It is assumed that if a person is willing to seek advice from someone, the advice giver is considered to be a legitimate, or valid, source of information…Advice givers, therefore, can reasonably be viewed as influential with respect to advice seekers."

(b) Advice as social support

Another way in which the process of advice can be conceptualised is as a mechanism for providing social support. This has been discussed at length within this chapter, particularly in the work of Goldsmith (2004) on enacted support and supportive communication. Essentially, from a communication perspective, advice as a form of social support can be defined as "messages that make recommendations about what to do, think, or feel in response to a problematic situation" (MacGeorge, Feng, & Thompson, 2008, p.157).

(c) Advice as social learning

A third conceptualisation of advice as 'social' considers the mechanism of 'social learning'. According to Cross and Sproull (2006), who, as discussed, proposed the concept of 'information relationships' in advice giving: "Learning is affected by existing knowledge, and by specific relational characteristics and source behaviours, that enhance or hinder one's ability to learn from another" (p.1). Advice as a process of social learning has also been considered more specifically within the energy advice literature (for example, Darby, 1999) and this will be discussed in more detail in subsequent sections of this chapter.

Throughout the literature, as has been demonstrated, there is considerable overlap between these three perspectives of advice. For instance, research broadly situated within the communication paradigm tends to emphasise that advice involves processes of both social support and social influence; cognitive psychological studies of advice have focussed primarily on actors that affect the level of influence advice has. Bringing these three conceptualisation together - elements of support, influence

and learning – provide a useful overarching lens for exploring the experiences and role of advice as a social process.

As noted elsewhere in the thesis, there has been limited academic study of energy advice beyond evaluations of specific advice schemes or programmes, and this is particularly the case for research that applies social theory to understand the experiences of practice and policy in this area. Therefore, in developing a theoretical approach and considering relevant framings for the present research, the focus was shifted beyond energy to consider the application of theory to the study of advice across a variety of disciplines and utilising a range of methodological approaches. The sections here have detailed this review of the literature, highlighting the relevance of viewing advice as a social process and arriving at Goldsmith's (2004) Communication Model of Advice as a relevant framing for the present research.

In the remaining sections of this chapter, the focus will return to energy, and energy-related advice and support. More specifically, in further developing the theoretical approach to the present research, these sections will explore work that has centred on energy-related knowledge, expertise, and knowledge networks of advice and support.

3.4 Theorising energy advice and support: energy knowledge and expertise

3.4.1 Energy literacy and energy know-how

The application of energy 'know-how' and energy literacy features regularly in our everyday lives. Consider, for example, changing the control settings on the thermostat as the temperatures change in line with the seasons, or receiving an energy bill and reviewing the detail for accuracy. Or, for example, how best to avoid, reduce or act

against damp or mould at home, or a persistent draught in the living room and how best to stop the cold air coming in. Such typical every day examples require a level of knowledge related to domestic energy in the home, whether in terms of heating controls, fuel costs and billing practices, adaptations to building fabric, household behaviours, air and heat flows, or relevant sources of information and responsibility when things go wrong. As Simcock *et al.* (2013) notes, in energy policy "knowledge is one important part of the package of elements required for action" (p.2), which, as with some of the examples above, encompasses efforts to tackle energy vulnerability. As such, it is important to consider how 'energy-related knowledge' is understood, and one conceptualisation which has informed the present study draws on the literature of 'know-how' (Burchell, Rettie & Roberts, 2015; Royston, 2014, Simcock *et al.*, 2013).

In a paper exploring the conceptual, practical and policy implications of householder energy-related knowledge, Burchell, Rettie and Roberts (2015) outline that there are two predominant conceptual approaches drawn upon in the literature: 'energy literacy' and 'energy know-how'. Energy literacy approaches, as they note, "emphasise *factual knowledge*, cognitive reasoning, and *ideal attitudes* and *behaviours*" and "within this mainstream approach, education and communications are key policy recommendations." (Burchell, Rettie & Roberts, 2015, p.1979). In the literature, energy literacy (or 'carbon capability', see for example Seyfang *et al.*, 2007) is largely rooted in behavioural models of educational and social psychology. Research within this area had predominantly used quantitative methodologies which, as Burchell, Rettie and Roberts (2015) argue, "tends towards the assertion of a highly codified, top-down canon of knowledge, attitudes and behaviours against which people can be measured" (p.1981). In UK policy, government discourse, and the commercial sector, the energy literacy approach is regarded as the 'mainstream', where a notable emphasis is on

education, communication and social marketing (Burchell, Rettie & Roberts, 2015), hence the value in theoretical contributions to the evidence base rooted to framings of social learning.

In contrast, however, know-how approaches "emphasise *practical skills*, *experience* and *guidance*" (Burchell, Rettie & Roberts, 2015, p.1979). 'Know-how' is said to be acquired through everyday experience and practice, and such approaches focus on "the ways in which these processes of coming to know rely upon – and can therefore be enhanced by – a variety of forms of peer-to-peer and expert-to-lay (or non-expert) demonstration and guidance within so-called communities of practice" (Burchell, Rettie & Roberts, 2015, p.1982). Here, there is an acknowledgement of knowledge exchange resulting from both peer-to-peer and expert-to-lay interactions – drawing attention to, as with the present study, the role of informal others and mundane interactions in the context of energy-related problems.

Studies exploring 'know-how' draw more so from qualitative methodologies, with researchers employing sociological, ethnographic and anthropological theory and concepts in related studies. As discussed by Royston (2014), the concept is underpinned by the theoretical framings of 'know-what' and 'know-how' (see for example Ryle, 1949), where "At the heart of the know-what/know-how dichotomy is a distinction between the cognitive, informational and factual nature of know-what, and the active, practical and skills-based nature of know-how" (Catney et al., 2014; Royston, 2014; as cited in Burchell, Rettie and Roberts, 2015, p.1981).

Of significant relevance to the present study and relating to the work of Goldsmith (2004) discussed earlier, know-how approaches emphasise the "highly contextualised nature of knowledge about energy" (Burchell, Rettie & Roberts, 2015, p.1981). Although this is discussed specifically in research related to energy demand reduction,

there are clear ways in which this can be also understood in the broader context of energy-related action, including responses to the challenges of energy vulnerability. Instead of focusing on 'effectiveness', however, such an approach moves towards understanding how energy-related knowledge can be perceived as 'valuable' and 'actionable'. Again, similarities to Goldsmith's (2004) articulation that effectiveness should be understood as meaningful actions and not solely behaviours can be noted here. Related to this, Simcock *et al.* (2013) outline three ways of tailoring such knowledge by considering: (1) the material infrastructure of the building and appliances, (2) existing ways of doing things within the household, and (3) the level of existing know-how in the household (Burchell, Rettie & Roberts, 2015, p.1982). The latter being of particular significance in this context.

In agreement with Darby (1999; 2003), the conceptual lens of energy know-how defines knowledge as '*practical (and context-dependent)*' and '*highly tacit*'. Tacit knowledge, as described by Burchell, Rettie and Roberts (2015), is "complex, implied or intuited and therefore not amenable to straightforward articulation, communication, codification or formalisation" (p.1982). As such, practical and tacit energy knowledge is referred to as 'sticky' and is seen to underpin much of criticism charged at "the policy tools of education and mass communication that are recommended in literacy approaches" (p.1982), critiques of which have been illustrated in Wynne's (1992) deficit-model and Shove's (2010) attitude-behaviour-choice thinking. Brown (2013) further interrogates this with an exploration of psychological approaches to understanding the limitations of mass communication and information in the context of energy knowledge. Criticism of the default setting being a fixation on how (and measuring if) energy-related knowledge or information is used, rather than how best to understand and enhance meaningful communication is central to this (Brown,

2013). Additionally, linking to the discussion in Chapter Two, 'rational' conceptual models are commonly drawn upon in this domain whereby providing individuals with the correct information is seen to be sufficient in changing behaviours or solving energy-related problems, despite extensive research showing this to be largely ineffective (Stern, 2011, as cited in Brown, 2013). Again, this critiques draw out that what constitutes meaningful engagement and action has tended to be overlooked by such theoretical framings.

One of the major criticisms levelled at the energy know-how approach argues that with an explicit focus on knowledge alone the concept might be regarded as 'reductionist' in nature. As Burchell, Rettie and Roberts (2015) point out, in relation to climate change mitigation, such an approach might be seen as overlooking questions related to:

> "…systems of provision, infrastructures, materials, 'sayings and doings', attitudes, values, financial incentives, 'choice architectures', defaults, social norms and even the inadequacy of an emphasis on behaviour when the challenge of climate change demands wholesale social change" (p.1980).

However, in agreement with their response to this criticism and in line with the work of Simcock *et al.* (2013), the concept of 'energy know-how' should be viewed pragmatically (as one part of a package of efforts) and recognised as a term that is 'self-explanatory', and therefore 'meaningful' to a wide range of individuals working within the field. For example, adopting such a term has potential benefits for disseminating research beyond academia, for instance, in sharing findings with community-based advice organisations.

3.4.2 Energy expertise

Expertise has been defined as professional, interpersonal and intrapersonal forms of knowledge (Côté & Gilbert, 2009) that can be acquired through training, study or practice. Throughout this chapter, this concept has appeared a number of times and, reflecting on professional experience, the importance of this was somewhat expected. In relation to the aims of the present research, how expertise is understood in relation to housing energy and associated energy vulnerabilities has significance in understanding the role of others and the extent to which this shapes or hinders experiences of effective energy advice and support. It is, therefore, worth considering at this point how understandings of 'expertise' have been drawn upon and, more specifically, how 'energy expertise' is understood and/or acquired.

In cognitive psychological studies of advice, for example, perceptions of expertise have been linked to choosing particular sources of advice (Keith *et al.*, 2010), the trustworthiness of an advice source (Bonaccio & Dalal, 2006), as well as the likelihood that advice will be utilised (Harvey & Fischer, 1997; Zagenczyk & Murrell, 2009). The Communication Model (Goldsmith, 2004) develops this thinking by introducing the importance of identities (which can include 'expert' or 'non-expert' identities) in advice-giving, and associated challenges and dilemmas that may arise if such identities are not honoured or valued. In energy advice research more specifically, expertise in terms of experience and local knowledge are characteristics found in an 'effective' energy advisor (Green *et al.*, 1998). Lastly, as noted in the previous section, processes of acquiring energy 'know-how' rely upon and are enhanced by the involvement of peer-to-peer and expert-to-lay (or non-expert) relationships and interactions.

In terms of non-expert or lay expertise in the context of energy vulnerability – the role of the informal other - little has been discussed in the literature to date, and indeed this

is one way in which the present research intends to make a contribution (see Chapter One). In more formalised settings of energy advice, however, some practical aspects in the process of acquiring energy expertise can be noted. A useful discussion can be found in the study by Reeves (2016), which focused on the role of localised and community-based support for those living in or at risk of fuel poverty, drawing from data generated by a sample of organisations responsible for delivering energy advice. 'Knowledge development' in relation to energy expertise across these formal settings varied between roles and organisations, however, some of the key factors in effective provision identified by Reeves (2016) included:

- energy advice professional qualifications

- unqualified volunteers given initial training of between two and ten hours, which was provided internally or by a project support worker

- shadowing of more experienced assessors supported by discussion after visits between advisors of issues that arose to support on-going learning

- retired engineering professionals still confident of their abilities working as advisors

- basic advice delivered by volunteers with a greater focus on signposting

- a volunteer-delivered home visit to collect data for analysis separately by a professional energy advisor

While this evidences some of the strategies adopted in formalised settings, many of which are commonly noted in accounts of professional practice among advisors, it is recognised that other ways of developing 'energy expertise' are possible. This points towards more informal experiences of gaining expertise in relation to an energy-related matter, and useful insights here can be drawn upon here in relation to the body of work examining the concept of 'experts by experience' (McLaughlin, 2009) or in Goldsmith's

(2004) terms, as "'commiserators' with similar experiences" (p.309). Ultimately though, understanding how energy expertise is acquired both within and beyond formal settings represents a gap in the existing knowledge base.

3.4.3 Community Knowledge Networks

Considering how energy knowledge is exchanged through advice, specifically concerning informal exchanges, a relevant theoretical discussion can be found in the 'Community Knowledge Network' (CKN) approach (Catney *et al.*, 2013; Simcock *et al.*, 2013). Essentially, this approach offers a framework for research "which recognises the contexts and relationships in which people live and use energy" (Simcock *et al.*, 2013, p. 506), and it is this emphasis on 'context' and 'social relations', specifically regarding energy knowledge, that brings to the fore a clear relevance in relation to the present study.

The development of the framework emerged as part of a large interdisciplinary research project - 'Reducing Energy Consumption through Community Knowledge Networks' (RECCKN) - that investigated "how people find out about energy issues, the barriers to the spread of energy knowledge and awareness, and how this knowledge might be more effectively shared in different types of communities" (RECCKN, 2013). Using qualitative and participatory methodological approaches, the research focused on two areas, distinct in terms of socioeconomic profiles and energy-related activity. A total of fifty-five households were included, and qualitative data was generated using home energy interviews, focus groups and participant-designed actions.

The research identified that *content*, *form* and the *source* of energy knowledge has significant implications for the way in which it is perceived (Simcock *et al.*, 2013). As with earlier research, trustworthiness is critical, as well as perceived expertise of the

source, though this doesn't necessarily refer to expertise in terms of formal training. Indeed, peers without formal experience or training were found to be "valuable sources of advice that was relevant, grounded and practical" (Simcock *et al.*, 2013, p.9), thus supporting earlier findings (Hitchings & Day, 2011; Darby, 2003). Responding to the valuable role of the informal other, the research concluded that: "alongside the current policy focus on, and funding for, 'expert' advisors, there potentially is value in support for strategies that encourage and create opportunities for the exchange of 'informal' knowledge between peers" (Simcock *et al.*, 2013, p. 9). Having discussed some the major findings of the research, the relevance of the CKN approach as a conceptual framework will now be discussed.

One of the main distinctions emphasised by this approach, similar to that asserted by Darby (1999; 2003) and discussed in relation to 'energy know-how', is that within the context of energy research, practice and policy, information and knowledge are not synonymous. As such, the importance of 'situated knowledge', 'practices' and thus experience, are all emphasised. In contrast to the dominant political discourse surrounding energy in the UK, the CKN approach moves away from research in energy knowledge and information provision driven by "methodologically individualised, informational deficit models" (Catney *et al.*, 2013, p.512) arguing that such approaches overlook "…the importance of place, space and interaction in shaping human behaviour" (Miller 1992, p. 23). As has been noted throughout, these aspects are central to the present research, also.

Central to the CKN approach is "…the hypothesis that some communities are better equipped than others to meet energy challenges due to their economic and organisational resources and social capital" (Catney *et al.*, 2013, p.510). In this regard, the framework draws upon energy justice frameworks, where justice principles are

applied to energy policy, production, consumption, activism and security (Jenkins *et al.*, 2016). Specifically, the CKN approach acknowledges inequity and challenges associated with 'recognitional justice', one of three core tenets, which in simple terms, is regarded as a conceptual lens that "moves researchers to consider which sections of society are ignored or misrepresented" (Jenkins *et al.*, 2016, p.3). As such, a contextual approach informed by recognitional justice is called for.

The CKN approach has roots in the conceptual understandings proposed in the literature on energy 'know-how', and also draws relevance from key aspects of 'communities of practice' research, as discussed earlier. Drawing together much of the discussion within the latter parts of this literature review, some key aspects are particularly worth noting (and, as such, have been underlined in the quote below). In outlining where the CKN approach is seen to 'overlap' with the community of practice literature, Catney *et al.* (2013, p.515, *emphasis added*) notes that the framework is:

> "…focused on <u>collaborative approaches to problem-solving</u>. It is also based on the conditions for creating a "<u>social fabric for learning</u>", emphasises the importance of <u>identity in participation</u>, articulates a <u>network perspective on "knowledge filtering"</u>, and <u>shares a concern with distinguishing between information and knowledge</u> (Wenger *et al.*, 2002, p.7–9)."

As demonstrated here, this framework brings together many of the key aspects that have been drawn out within this chapter. As such, discussions surrounding the communication of enacted support, energy know-how, knowledge networks and communities of practice have been drawn upon to frame the present research, both conceptually and theoretically.

3.5 Considering 'context'

Throughout the literature review, the importance of 'context' in relation to time and place have been noted on a number of occasions as a key features. This has relevance to the presents research where, as the title suggests, the aim is to explore the social communicative process of energy-related advice and support advice within and beyond formal settings. Given that 'context' represents a central theoretical focus of the study (see, for example, Goldsmith's CMoA, 2004, and Simcock *et al*'s CKN approach, 2014), the following sections will briefly detail ways in which in-depth considerations of this aspect have been explored, specifically beyond the formal energy advice setting.

3.5.1 Mundane energy advice: energy vulnerability and social relations

A clear factor that became evident from the literature was that energy advice research, and advice research more broadly, has predominantly focused on organisational or institutional contexts with formally trained advisors. Shaw, Potter and Hepburn (2015) note that this is "not accidental" given that "in informal interactions, advice is not an intrinsic feature of the interaction, which is made relevant by an institutional role" (p.318).

Considering a key objective of the present research (see Chapter One), Shaw's (2012) study investigating advice in 'mundane settings' is particularly relevant. Using a naturalistic approach, Shaw (2012) examined the social organisation of advice between mothers and daughters during telephone conversations, with a focus on advice-giving sequences, as well as the way in which relationships are understood and constructed within such interactions. Consequently, this study prompted a return

to the energy literature to examine in more detail the role of the informal 'other' in energy advice.

Several studies have highlighted that actors constituting an individual's immediate interpersonal network play a critical role in supporting those living in or at risk of fuel poverty. This role has largely emerged within discussions of research findings that are particularly evident in qualitative studies. Indeed, as noted in Chapter Two, Darby (2003) outlined that:

> "Millions of householders never ask for advice, yet they learn something from random sources: friends, neighbours, the mass media, labels, Do-It-yourself, instructions and chance events. There has been little research into the nature of this learning, still less what might be done to improve it" (p.1225)

More recently, within Middlemiss and Gillard's (2015) work on 'energy vulnerability', 'social relations in and out of the home' were categorised as one of six key aspects of energy vulnerability. Evidence from this study illustrated that informal actors provide various forms of support, from financial assistance in meeting energy costs, to practical support with fuel-hungry practices, such as laundry and cooking. While energy advice-giving or –seeking was not discussed in this research and represents an area that has to date received limited attention, it does evidence support-seeking interactions between householders and informal others; in this regard, it might be reasonable to predict that, to some extent, such interactions could demonstrate certain characteristics of energy advice.

Building on this early work, energy vulnerability and the role of 'social relations' is an emerging area of interest within the field (Middlemiss *et al.*, 2019; Hargreaves & Middlemiss, 2020), and an area in which the research detailed in this thesis intends to

contribute. Research to date has explored the role of 'social relations' in two ways: the first, in how relationships shape people's ability to cope with energy vulnerability (Middlemiss *et al.*, 2019), and the second, proposing a typology of social relations, in building an understanding of how this relates to energy demand (Hargreaves & Middlemiss, 2020).

While both studies examine more formalised roles of intermediaries and support agencies, it is the focus on the role of family, friends and other informal actors that is particularly significant. Filling a gap in the existing evidence base, this work broadens understanding the role of social relations in how energy demand and vulnerability is experienced and the factors that shape these experiences and their relevance in relation to policy and practice (for example, the design and delivery of energy advice). Innovative in method, too, by drawing on secondary qualitative data, a key finding form this research points to the significance of people having the capacity (or not) to maintain meaningful relationships with others who may provide advice and support. Additionally, Hargreaves and Middlemiss (2020) propose a useful typology of significant social relations in the context of energy demand that includes those with: family and friends; agencies and communities; and, in terms of social identities. The impact these 'types' of relations are described as having, both positive and negative, range from shaping energy practices, to lending money, and constraining choices around payment methods and tariffs, to access to support, including energy consumption and energy efficiency advice. At the core of both, and as will be set out in the following chapter in relation to the research detailed in this thesis, is a focus on lived experience, bringing to the fore subjective conceptualisations and a bottom-up framing of energy in terms of use, demand, vulnerability, and other related experiences.

It is important to note that while findings have begun to emerge regarding the valuable role of relatives, friends and neighbours in the context of energy advice and fuel poverty, this is an area that remains underexplored (Middlemiss *et al.*, 2019). As stated, it is predominantly here that the present research intends to make a contribution, adding to this recent work with a more specific focus on energy vulnerability as experienced through the prism of energy-related advice and support.

3.5.2 The emerging role of online contexts

Thus far, the context or spaces and settings where energy-related advice and support occurs has received relatively little discussion, and where this has been noted (see Chapter Two) this has typically referenced that provided in person or by telephone. Across public services there is a rapid expansion in the use of online spaces and developing service that is "digital by default" (see for example Schou & Pors, 2019; Williams *et al.*, 2016). Similar shifts can be noted in the advice sector where there is a growing concern that face-to-face advice and support is under threat as a result of technological advances and funding cuts (Burton, 2020). In the context of energy advice and support, this is evidenced most notably by the UK government's decision to switch its main funded provision of energy advice to an online service (see Chapter Two). Resulting from COVID-19, many temporary shifts to remote services and use of online spaces may become a more permanent and dominant feature of providing advice and support. This signals a likely worsening in capacity to access to support for many, and consequently increased vulnerability, particularly among those, for example, who are digitally excluded.

However, online is also seen to provide a unique opportunity. Considering advice research more broadly, MacGeorge, Feng and Guntzviller (2016) state that online spaces are an area of 'advice' research that is currently lacking. In the context of

energy advice and knowledge exchange, specifically, research has identified that individuals perceive "the internet as a positive tool for interactive information gathering" (Simcock *et al.*, 2013, p.9). However, given that many previous studies on energy advice were undertaken at a time when internet use was less prevalent, it is unsurprising that there is a paucity of research exploring online spaces in the existing evidence base.

Initial investigations undertaken as part of the development of this research, however, revealed notable examples of how energy advice and information is publicised or communicated online at present. Key examples found involved messages being directly targeted towards 'informal others' (see Figure 3.1 and 3.2 below). One example, from a social media site, urging individuals to 'be a good neighbour this winter', exercising extra vigilance with regard to vulnerable, particularly older residents living nearby. A second example, from a fuel poverty awareness video, is targeted towards relatives. Both function as 'signposting' prompts and link to information regarding energy advice provision.

Figure 3.1: Screenshot from the 'Be a Good Neighbour' Winter Welfare campaign on Salford City council's Facebook page (January 2016)

Figure 3.2: Video still from Bromford Lab's Fuel Poverty Awareness video
(August 2016)

A third example - online forums - takes a slightly different form, presenting naturalistic energy advice interactions as they occur in situ. In recent years, online forums have become an increasingly common space investigated within the wider body of advice-giving literature (Hine, 2014; Kouper, 2010; Silenced, 2013; Jan & Pung, 2013). This is not least because online spaces have emerged as everyday commonplaces or 'sites' in which diverse social interactions occur, with one of the major activities being that of asking for and sharing information or advice (Kouper, 2010). Such forums offer "an interesting opportunity for advancement of knowledge about online communities and the role advice plays in them" (Kouper, 2010, p.1).

Regarding energy-related advice and support, there are several reasons why this presents a particularly interesting context to consider as part of a wider study of energy-related advice and support. Firstly, energy advice services, as noted, face considerable funding challenges. If services cease to be funded, or service provision is reduced, it is important to understand other contexts in which energy advice occurs. Secondly, many individuals either do not or cannot access formal energy advice. This may be due to difficulty accessing an organisation (for example, because of where someone lives, or challenges related to a disability or ill-health) or a lack of awareness regarding the service. For others, there may be awareness of such services, yet a decision is made not to access them, seeking advice elsewhere. Thirdly, energy

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advice in online forums can offer a more permanent form of advice than that which is given face-to-face or over the phone. Research has shown that individuals often prefer written information which supplements the advice given –allowing this to be taken away and reviewed again at a later stage and multiple times if needed (DECC, 2014). Lastly, and unique to this context, energy advice in online forums introduces the potential for anonymity unfound in other approaches discussed. Known information about participating members of an online forum is typically restricted only to a self-selected username. One reason anonymity may be preferred in this regard relates to issues of stigma surrounding certain energy behaviours, such as heating practices (Hards, 2013; Reid, McKee, & Crawford, 2015).

3.6 Chapter summary

In developing a theoretically informed approach to the study of energy-related advice and support, this chapter has detailed key findings from a literature review of the study of advice, more broadly at first, and then more specifically in relation to energy-related research. The chapter first focussed on theoretical approaches to studying advice, considering three dominant paradigms: (1) cognitive psychological studies, (2) research informed by network theories, and (3) language-based or interactional studies of advice. The applicability of Goldsmith's (2004) 'Communication Model of Advice' was outlined particularly in terms of its relevance regarding its conceptualisation of advice as meaningful, situated and rhetorical.

Following, the chapter returned to consider how research has applied social theory to the study of energy. The review established that there is a dearth of research that has drawn from multiple perspectives of individuals with direct experience of energy advice and support, such as providers and recipients. The chapter then considered theoretical

discussions related to energy knowledge – concentrating on the concept of 'energy know-how' and discussing the development of energy expertise, particularly in formal settings. The Community Knowledge Network approach was then introduced as a way of drawing on communities of practice theory, and the concept of energy know-how, to explore both formal and informal exchanges of energy-related knowledge. Bringing discussions of the communication of enacted support, energy know-how, knowledge networks and communities of practice, the theoretical and conceptual framework for the present research is situated here rooted primarily in the work of Goldmsith and the Communication Model of Advice, which, as discussed, has many similarities to the Community Knowledge Network approach.

The chapter concludes by considering the importance of 'context' and discussed the literature in relation to the two main ways in which context *beyond* formal advice settings has been investigated.

3.6.1 Introducing the research questions

Drawing on key elements of the discussion relating to policy and practice in Chapter Two and theoretical and conceptual framings here in Chapter Three, a number of research questions were formulated:

1. How do people experience advice and support for energy-related problems?
2. What role do other actors play across formal and informal settings?
3. What shapes and hinders effectiveness of energy advice and support across formal and informal settings?

4. How is the relationship between the formal and informal in the context of energy-related advice and support understood, and what are the implications for policy and practice?

These questions aim to address identified gaps in the literature, set out across Chapters Two and Three, namely by foregrounding experiential accounts of advice providers and recipients; examining the role of others, particularly informal others in the context of energy advice; and seeking to better understand how effectiveness is understood and what factors are perceived to shape and hinder the effectiveness of energy-related advice and support as a social process.

Now that the guiding research questions have been established, the following chapter, Chapter Four, will outline the methodological framework and approach adopted.

Chapter Four: A Phenomenological Study of Energy Advice and Support

4.1 Introducing this chapter

This chapter, set out in two parts, details the methodological approach underpinning the research and the specific methods adopted to gather and analyse the data. Focusing on methodology first, it outlines the rationale for adopting a qualitative approach, as well as considering the epistemological and ontological assumptions that underpin the research itself. From these methodological foundations, it is in this section of the thesis that phenomenology, specifically that which has developed within and from the discipline of psychology, will be introduced and its current prominence in social policy research discussed. As Sullivan, Gibson and Riley (2012) note, research methodology can be thought of as the wider approach to the study and that which *informs* decisions related to research questions, data generation and analysis. In the second part of this chapter, then, the research methods and techniques used to prepare for and undertake fieldwork are outlined, as well an overview of the analytical approach to working with the data generated.

4.2 Developing a methodological approach

4.2.1 Choosing a qualitative approach

At the centre of the present research is a concern with the subjective experiences of advice and support related to energy problems at home. With the delivery and design of social policies intended to tackle the issue of fuel poverty in mind, this is more specifically concerned with how such experiences can allow us to better understand

what *effective* advice and support is, and how different forms of advice and support, as well as the actors and contexts involved play a role.

Discussed in detail in the previous chapters, the paradigm of advice research, particularly that within certain strands of psychology, has tended to focus on cognitive processes, such as decision-making, or mechanisms of charting or mapping features of advice activity or ideal characteristics of the advisor, for instance in research underpinned by network theory. Studies of this kind, as noted, have largely employed quantitative designs within controlled, experimental settings. In this work, the *experiences* of the advice process – whether seeking, receiving, rejecting or giving advice - are not the focus of analysis, and therefore any conclusions drawn are limited to the analysis of outcomes or options presented within a typically fixed and controlled set of responses (i.e., survey answers or times in an experiment). Qualitative methods and analytical approaches are less common, as noted.

Similarly, in academic and policy debates surrounding energy vulnerability and energy poverty more broadly, there is a well-noted dearth of qualitative insights (Lusambili *et al.*, 2011; Harrington *et al.*, 2005; Middlemiss & Gillard, 2013; Middlemiss & Gillard, 2015). However, as argued elsewhere in the thesis, the reframing of fuel poverty through concepts such as energy vulnerability has the capacity "to strengthen the position of qualitative work within the field, highlighting the importance of understanding the changing nature of the issue and how this is experienced from the perspectives of the fuel poor themselves" (Butler, 2016, p.28). Further, considering the process of energy-related advice in the context of fuel poverty specifically, drawing the above-mentioned areas of scholarship together, Darby has argued that "we do not know without careful qualitative evaluation, what has been learned and whether it is likely to be productive" (Darby, 2003, p. 1225).

Considering also the broader context of energy scholarship, Sovacool (2014) highlights the notable imbalance between qualitative and quantitative work, with the former, to some extent, representing a significant methodological gap in the field. Spanning fifteen years of energy research, a content analysis of more than 4,400 published academic articles revealed that only 12.6 percent of the evidence base identified as having utilised 'qualitative' methods in some way. Furthermore, with almost eight percent of such studies stating that data was generated using surveys, which typically generates quantitative data, this likely means that even fewer studies have drawn on traditional qualitative methods (e.g., interviews and focus groups). Looking also at disciplinary expertise across the corpus, less than one in five authors identified as having had training in the social sciences, with far fewer making direct disciplinary affiliations with areas such as psychology, anthropology or communication studies (identified in just 0.3 percent of the data set). As Sovacool (2014) warns this imbalance risks downplaying or masking "the human dimensions of energy use and environmental change" and noting the work of prominent sociologists Lutzenhiser and Shove, has resulted in a "blind spot" driven by conventional techno-economic thinking" (p.1).

Summarising the literature in this way shows that in these areas of scholarship – fuel poverty, energy vulnerability and related advice and support – there are substantial gaps that have been identified. Qualitative research is considered to have the ability to advance current understanding in this regard and therefore make a valuable contribution to knowledge. This provides a clear, evidence-based rationale for adopting a qualitative approach in the research set out in this thesis. While this research can therefore be positioned as offering a contribution to a methodological gap in the field, a qualitative approach was also deemed most appropriate because of

its ability to explore and develop the research *questions* – not testable or measurable hypotheses - which as Mason (2002) describes, are the backbone of research design.

Qualitative research has been described as "*characteristically exploratory, fluid and flexible, data driven and context sensitive*" (Mason, 2002, p.24); an approach that explores the physical, social and psychological world from the viewpoint of the 'person under study' (Schmidt, as cited in Krefting, 1991). Seamon and Gill (2016) expand upon this, outlining how inductive in nature, qualitative research "draws on the richness and complexity of human situations and meanings to generate descriptive generalisations and theories grounded in experience" (p.116). Moving beyond the individual, qualitative research explores and enables the co-construction of meaning and understanding relating to social reality, and "the ways that social processes, institutions, discourses or relationships work" (Mason, 2002, p.1).

While there are many different ways of *doing* qualitative research, Flick, von Kardoff and Steinke (2005) draw out a number of basic theoretical assumptions or commonalities underlining qualitative research as a whole. Firstly, there is a focus on the social and specifically social reality, and this is understood as shared, co-constructed, and linked closely to the ways in which people make meaning of their experiences and lives. Secondly, within explorations of the everyday lived and social realities, processes and reflexivity are important. Thirdly, by exploring the 'subjective', for instance through stories, views, experiential accounts, beliefs or opinions, 'objective' life circumstances, which may include age, income, or household characteristics, are made relevant and ascribed meaning. Fourthly, construction and reconstructions of social reality are understood as being communicative in nature. These assumptions are helpful as a starting point for understanding the framework, methodologically speaking, within which this research is situated. Moving from the

wider paradigm to the specific assumptions underlining the research, the following sections will set out how this study is positioned in terms of ontology, epistemology and, in particular, the application of phenomenology to explore lived experience.

4.2.2 Relativism as ontology

Grix (2004) outlines that ontology is a fundamental component of research from which "one's epistemological and methodological positions logically flow" (p.59). As such, in considering the more specific methodological aspects of this research, it is sensible to begin here. Ontology can be understood as the way in which we view the world (Grix, 2004) - a theory of knowing (what is there to know) and being (what it means to be) (Sullivan, Gibson & Riley, 2012). Our ontological position is implicit: pre-existing and separate to the topics we choose to research, the approaches adopted, and any conclusions drawn, and ontological claims relate to assumptions about social reality, the 'units' that make it up, and how these components interact.

Underpinning this research is a *relativist* ontology where the "view that belief and principles, particularly evaluative ones, have no universal or timeless validity, but are only valid for the age in which, or the social group or the individual person by which they are held" (Eadie, 1977, p.736). Outlining the main aspects of relativism as an ontological framework for research, Sullivan, Gibson and Riley (2012) state that such an approach has a number of guiding principles, namely that it: searches for meaning rather than truth; views 'truths' as subjective, dynamic and contextual; explores knowledge that is contextual; is concerned with 'multiple truths' that may conflict but are still true; and acknowledges that perceptions or truths may change with time. As will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, this aligns with the assumptions in the strand of phenomenology underpinning this research.

4.2.3 Interpretivism as an epistemological approach

If ontology is understood as what can be known in the world, epistemology refers to the theory of knowledge or ways of knowing. As Grix (2004) outlines, this relates to the "forms of knowledge, access to knowledge, and ways of acquiring or gathering knowledge" (p.166). This has a key role in particular points of the research process, with one's epistemological position informing the decision as to which strategies in data generation and analysis will be used. Although understood as overlapping in many ways, different epistemological positions can be understood as situated somewhere on a continuum between positivism, an attempt to 'explain' social reality, to interpretivism, which seeks to interpret or understand social reality (Grix, 2004).

In a review of research that has investigated technical and non-technical aspects of 'energy' and 'buildings', Schweber and Leiringer (2012) note that there has been "an almost exclusive reliance on positivist methodologies" (p.4), with their analysis suggesting that such approaches consume as much as 80 percent of the evidence base. This is similarly the case in research concerning energy-related interventions, such as energy advice, where studies have largely used positivist approaches to focus on behavioural responses to determine or 'measure' levels of success (Darby, 2003; Brown, 2013). Situated within a behaviourist paradigm, that regards human behaviour as a set of responses to environmental cues (Skinner, 1974), this perspective assumes that an individual's actions "can be modified by means of external influences such as rewards, punishments and repeated messages" (Darby, 2003, p.1217). However, as Darby (2003) argues, this results in a tendency for research to adopt a 'black box' approach that overlooks interpretative, perceptual and experiential processes – in other words, ignoring that which happens in the mind of the individual

(views, perceptions and thoughts), as well as the social, historical and cultural contexts in which such processes or actions take place.

In response to this and other limitations of the existing evidence base, this chapter has outlined that a qualitative methodological approach will be adopted which allows "subjective experience, processes or sense making of a group of people in a particular context" (Sullivan, Gibson & Riley, 2012, p. 41) to be explored. More specifically, in this research, an interpretivist epistemological approach is adopted, similar to that of Darby (2003) and as advocated by Schweber and Leiringer (2012), in which energy-related advice is regarded as a social process, where understandings, meaning and experiences of are made sense of through language. This can also be thought of in terms of dyadic communication, such as that which constitutes the focus in the theoretical framework drawn upon in this study (Goldmsith, 2004).

A fundamental aspect of interpretivism is that it adopts an anti-positivist position: while positivists seek objectivity, and tend to model research on natural sciences, anti-positivist positions, such as interpretivism, believe in subjectivity and acknowledge a difference between the natural and the social world (Grix, 2004, p.82). Through an interpretivist lens, the world is seen as constructed through the interaction of individuals, where discourse and language become the main focus of the research (Seamon & Gill, 2016). For interpretivists, there is a more predominant concern with *understanding*, as opposed to *explanation* (Grix, 2004), and this emphasis on *understanding* means that interpretivists do not seek to establish causal explanations of the social world, and instead focus on "meaning in the study of social life and emphasise the role language plays in 'constructing' reality" (p.84).

Interpretivism is an 'umbrella term' which covers "many variations of approach to social enquiry" (Grix, 2004, p.82). One of these approaches, and specifically that which has

been adopted in the present study, is phenomenology which will be introduced in detail in the following section. Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to research that regards social phenomena as socially constructed, and, in congruence with the broader interpretivist perspective, is mainly focused on how individuals make sense of the world around them (Bahari, 2010). One of the main aims in phenomenology "is to identify and understand the broader, underlying patterns…that give order and coherence to the richness and 'chaos' of human experience as it is lived in everyday life" (Seamon & Gill, 2016, p.122).

Considering research that has focussed on housing and energy specifically, the extant literature can be broadly categorised as adopting one of four dominant methodological approaches: technical assessments, building oriented research, people-oriented research, and in-depth qualitative studies (Ambrose, Goodchild & Flaherty, 2017). As Ambrose, Goodchild and Flaherty (2017) outline, the former two approaches can be understood as adopting a more positivist stance, while the latter two can be considered more phenomenological in nature (see Figure 4.1 below).

Figure 4.1: Different approaches to studying housing and energy issues
(adapted from Ambrose et al., 2017)

Reviewing a range of studies within the UK context which have adopted each of the four approaches, the authors conclude that "qualitative and discursive methodologies have a useful role to play" (Ambrose, Goodchild & Flaherty, 2017, p.163), and in particular, emphasise the value of phenomenological approaches in investigating energy-related experiences of home (i.e., in terms of domestic energy). The strengths

of phenomenology are made clear through critiques of the alternative approaches, namely those within positivist traditions, which, among other criticisms, are seen as fundamentally reductionist in nature: "reducing people to objects, the passive recipients of an environment that is designed and developed by others" (p.165).

Notably, however, phenomenology is not without drawbacks and these are also acknowledged and discussed. One pragmatic challenge is that research methods aligned with such an approach (i.e., qualitative methods) can be costly, both in terms of monetary costs and researcher time. Also associated with methods, another critique of phenomenological approaches is that they are generally not viewed as "a viable alternative to large-scale surveys where a large sample is required to generate statistically significant insights of the type that indicates the phenomena or change observed is 'real', rather than a random or chance fluctuation" (Ambrose, Goodchild & Flaherty, 2017, p.165). In response, it is argued that if Social Policy research relies on positivist methods alone, such as large-scale surveys, then it risks reinforcing existing "world views, power relations and a narrow construction of social issues" (Boehm, Bowman & Zinn, 2013, p.309, as cited in Ambrose, Goodchild & Flaherty, 2017).

4.2.4 Phenomenological psychology

The origins of phenomenology as a philosophy

Emanating in Germany at the turn of the 20th century, the study of phenomena – phenomenology – is said to be guided by the motto 'Zu den Sachen' which can be translated to mean both ''to the things themselves'' or ''let's get down to what matters!'' (van Manen, 1990, p. 184, as cited in Dowling, 2005). The word phenomenon has its origins in the Greek *phaenesthai*, meaning to 'flare up', to 'show itself' or to 'appear'. Phenomenology can be understood and drawn upon in two distinct ways: (1) as a philosophical tradition or movement, or (2) as the study of experience or

methodological approach (Sullivan, Gibson & Riley, 2012). This section will focus more so on the former (with a phenomenologically informed approach to research methods discussed in second half of this chapter).

Briefly considering phenomenology as a method, however, in such research the focus is on subjective conceptualisations of lived experience and how individuals make sense of everyday life and the world around them. Epistemologically, it is situated within interpretivism, and as such, phenomenological researchers typically draw on qualitative data, often through interviews, in order to better understand the experience of a social phenomenon. In such research, there is no attempt to *explain*, but instead to better *understand* a particular topic or phenomenon. Its application across disciplines and topics of inquiry is manifold and diverse, with examples of studies having explored the experiences of social anxiety (Fischer, 1974), the transition to motherhood (Smith, 1999), suicide (Pompili, 2018), pet ownership (Schulman, 1990), bipolar disorder and medication (Soreca, Frank & Kupfer, 2009), teaching (Blase & Blase, 2003), sports sciences (Kerry & Armour, 2000), among myriad others, including energy and fuel poverty research (see for example: Ambrose *et al.*, 2017; Butler & Sherriff, 2017).

As a philosophical tradition, however, the focus of this section, phenomenological writing has tended to distinguish the tradition in three dominant ways. The first emanates from the 18th century philosophical works of the likes of Kant, Hegal and Brentano. Inspired by Brentano specifically, it is however, the work of Edmund Husserl that is most commonly recognised as founding the phenomenological movement in philosophy (Dowling, 2005) and is often termed 'descriptive' or 'Husserlian' phenomenology.

In 'Husserlian phenomenology', a founding principle for this branch of inquiry is the "careful examination of human experience" which "should be examined in the way that it occurs and in its own terms" (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p.12). Adopting what Husserl refers to as the 'phenomenological attitude', an individual's 'gaze' should be directed inwards to focus on and consider reflexively our perceptions, thoughts, memories, and emotions surrounding objects in the world, rather than outwardly on the objects themselves (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009; Reiners, 2012). A key concept borne from this strand of phenomenology is *intentionality* which relates to our awareness of the world and how we experience it, specifically noting that "whenever we are conscious, we are always conscious of something" (Langdridge, 2007, p.21). This distinguishes phenomenological psychology (discussed later in this chapter) from other modes of psychological inquiry, particularly those concerned with cognition, where there is typically a desire to understand that which is happening inside a person's mind. As noted earlier, cognitive studies have dominated a significant proportion of the advice literature to date.

Another key feature of this branch of inquiry is its concern with lived human experience, specifically focus on that which is taken for granted. Summarising the Husserlian phenomenological approach, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) write that:

> "…in our everyday life we are busily engaged in activities in the world, and we take for granted our experience of the world. In order to be phenomenological, we need to disengage from the activity and attend to the taken-for-granted experience of it." (p.13)

To achieve this 'natural attitude', Husserl sets out that, as a first step, our "taken-for-granted ways of living in the familiar, everyday world of objects" (Smith, flowers & Larkin, 2009, p.13) must be put to one side, or 'bracketed'. Langdridge (2007)

describes the Husserlian concept of the 'epoché' or bracketing as casting aside all presuppositions, attempting to see something as it appears, as if for the first time: it is the "belief that it is possible to stand outside of lived experience – one's own subjective position and the natural attitude "(p.23). Bracketing also relates to the notion of *phenomenological reduction* where the lifeworld or lived experience is that which is "understood as what individuals experience pre-reflectively, without resorting to interpretations" (Dowling, 2005). This approach to examining human experience demonstrates an attempt to focus on "essential features of a phenomenon as free as possible from cultural context" (Dowling, 2005, p.132).

The idea of being able to remove oneself, or at least put to one side all preconceptions of an experience, is widely contested and, according to Dowling and Cooney (2012), has led to phenomenological writing and research adopting one of two dominant positions: the first aligned with Husserlian descriptive phenomenology, and the second emanating from the work of existential philosophers and resulting in what is known as the 'hermeneutic turn' in phenomenology, where interpretation and language become central (Sullivan, Gibson & Riley, 2012; Langdridge, 2007).

Existential phenomenology and the hermeneutic turn

In what is often termed transcendental phenomenology, Husserl's ideas about the way in which we can examine lived experience, specifically our ability to step out of, or *transcend* the lifeworld – the world as concretely lived (Langdridge, 2007) – is what underlines the most significant shift in the history of phenomenology as a philosophical tradition. This shift, termed the 'hermeneutic turn', from descriptive Husserlian phenomenology leads us to the work of existential phenomenologists, such as Satre and Merleau-Ponty, but most notably, to the work of Martin Heidegger. Credited as one of the most significant philosophers of the twentieth century, having influenced the

social and human sciences, art, the humanities, and technology and computer science (van Manen, 2012), Heidegger's work is seen to have:

> "…recast the phenomenological project, moving away from a philosophical discipline which focuses on consciousness and essences of phenomena towards elaborating existential and hermeneutic (interpretive) dimensions (Finlay, 2009)." (Kafle, 2011, p.181)

Heidegger argued, in contrast to the early work of Husserl and rejecting the notion of the epoché, that it was "not possible for the philosopher to investigate the things in their appearing and identify their essence in a neutral or detached way" (Langdridge, 2007, p.27). This necessarily means that our understanding of experience, including the analysis or exploration of experiences of others, must consider the social, cultural and historical context in which it is experienced, or recounted. As such, Heideggerian phenomenology focuses not on describing experience, but instead demands interpretation; there is less of a concern with deriving or arriving at an essence, but rather a desire to interpret the meaning of things (Langdridge, 2007). Interpretative phenomenology then, drawing on the philosophy of hermeneutics, "moves beyond the description or core concepts of the experience and seeks meanings that are embedded in everyday occurrences" (Reiners, 2012, p.1).

In examining such everyday occurrences, and the nature of being and what it means to exist or experience difference features of existence, Heidegger developed the notion of *Daisen* (the notion of 'being') (Sullivan, Gibson & Riley, 2012). Langdridge (2007) describes this simply as Heidegger's reference to human subjectivity. Explorations or interpretations of *Daisen* encompass a number of features, of which a few are worth noting here. The first, *temporality*, the importance of time, is critical: to understand experience or existence in the present necessarily involves the past

(reflections) and projections of the future. *Facticity*, another key feature, relates to the limits of our choices in the everyday. As Langdridge (2007) notes, this includes limitations that may be physical, psychological, or social in nature, as well as those related to historical and/or cultural situatedness. *Mood* is also important and described as something that is lived 'pre-reflectively', meaning that we live in the world 'through' a mood which is understood later through reflection on experience. This has importance for the present study where, for instance, attitudes towards and reflections of emotions or moods are starting to attract attention in research of the *experiences* of energy vulnerability and what this means for mechanisms of coping or providing support (Longhurst & Hargreaves, 2019). Another key feature of *Dasein* is *care* which brings in the role of 'other', whether person or object, and also links to a significant aspect of the present study, where: "being-in-the-world revolves around us being involved in the world, actively engaged with other things and people" (Langdridge, 2007, p.31). The final feature to note here is *discourse*, which foregrounds the role of language in the hermeneutic turn in phenomenology. For Heidegger, "language is the house of Being" (1978, p.217) and through the function of language, whether speech acts, scientific language or poetry, we disclose our ways of being.

Of the hermeneutic philosophers, and building on the principles of Heidegger, the work of Gadamer, and to a somewhat greater extent, Ricoeur, plays a key role in the philosophical and methodological framing for the present research. Fundamental principles of interpretative phenomenology already outlined, such as the importance of language and discourse are central to the ideas of Gadamer and Ricoeur. Like Heidegger, Gadamer stressed the importance of *situatedness* in understanding lived experience, where the process is not about:

> "…producing a-historical and a-cultural truths about the world – the project of science – but rather something that is situated in a particular space and place, historically and culturally contingent" (Langdridge, 2007, p.42).

Language is central and is the way in which we gain an understanding of the world: the way in which we make meaning of life and experience. For Gadamer then, language, conversation, and speech must always be the focus, and is the way in which the world 'reveals itself'. Gadamer's work notes the importance of concepts such as 'self-understanding', 'pre-judgements' and 'horizons', which, brought together, require acknowledgement that we always speak from somewhere – illustrating the importance of positionality - and our 'effective histories' mean that our understanding occurs within a certain horizon. Notably, and of particular relevance to researcher reflexivity and positionality (discussed later in this chapter), we can also find ourselves limited by these horizons.

Langdridge (2007) notes that with demands for phenomenology to be less descriptive and more interpretative (or more psychological, as he also puts it), has come an awareness that much of our experience is communicated narratively, that is we use stories and narratives to structure, produce and re-produce, and thus to make sense of and share our experience of the lifeworld. Turning to the storied accounts of experience then, as a point of analysis to draw out understanding, is critical.

Ricoeurian phenomenology, a theoretical position drawn upon in this research, is characterised as adopting somewhat of a middle ground, or a third place. Firstly, Ricoeur accepts that the experience of being or 'existence' is something that pre-exists and extends beyond language. Simultaneously, however, there is a need for an interpretative understanding of human nature through language (Langdridge, 2007; Langdridge, 2007). This draws together dominants ideas set out in existential

phenomenology (existing beyond and outside of language) and more discursive approaches to phenomenological psychology.

In addition to the value of focusing on narrative meaning-making set out by Ricoeur, and drawing on elements of existential phenomenology, van Manen's development of a thematic approach in accessing the 'lifeworld' is particularly relevant. Developing on the work of Merleau-Ponty, and as shown in the table below, van Manen (2012) identifies five themes, termed *existentials*, that are useful for exploring the "meaning aspects of our lifeworld and of the particular phenomena that we may be studying" (van Manen, 2012, p.303). Many of these features, set out in the table below (Table 4.1), have relevance to understanding the experiences of energy vulnerability and related advice and support. Specifically, they provide a lens form which to understand the different characterisations of experience that in many ways align with the research questions and theoretical and conceptual framing of the research. This is particularly the case with lived relation, space and temporality.

Lifeworld theme (or 'existential')	Description	Possible relevance in context of energy vulnerability and related advice and support
lived relation (relationality)	*…how self and others are experienced with respect to the phenomena being studied* (p.303)	Actors and members of an individual's network, relationships between these individuals/roles, expertise
lived body (corporeality)	*...how the body (and mind) is experienced with respect to the phenomena being studied* (p.304)	Thermal comfort, as well as comfort related to other aspects of the inability to afford adequate 'energy services', the experience of physical or mental health and wellbeing, malnutrition, frailty, fatigue, etc.
lived space (spatiality)	*…how space is experienced with respect to the phenomena being studied* (p.305)	The home, advice settings, safe and unsafe spaces, etc.

lived time (temporality)	*…how time is experienced with respect to the phenomena being studied* (p.305)	Past, present and possible future experiences of energy vulnerability.
lived things and technology (materiality)	*…how 'things' are experienced with respect to the phenomena being studied* – *"It would be difficult to overestimate the significance of 'things' in our lives"* (p.306)	Deprivation of energy services and thus, to varying degrees and in a multitude of ways, deprivation of the 'things' that provide energy services (heating, phone charger, cooking facilities), inability to equip the household with the 'right' things, or safe equipment

Table 4.1: Van Manen's 'existentials' (2012) and relevance to energy vulnerability research

This section has introduced phenomenology as a philosophical movement, charting its development from the early work of Husserl and descriptive phenomenology to the later 'hermeneutic turn' and a focus on interpretation and language as a way of making meaning of lived through experience. It has set out the philosophy of Ricoeurian phenomenology and the importance of language, storytelling, and identity work: all important aspects for the methodological and analytical framing of the present research.

Lived experience and social policy research

As touched upon in the sections above, phenomenological inquiry has long been associated with the concept of 'lived experience'. Within social policy, a discipline that has been said to hold "an epistemological predilection for empiricism that foregrounds *experiential* ways of knowing" (MacIntosh & Wright, 2018, p.460, emphasis added), an insurgence of research utilising the concept of lived experience in recent years can be found. It is here, within the disciplinary bounds of Social Policy, that the research set out in this thesis is situated, alongside phenomenological psychology and communications studies. As such, this warrants a brief consideration of the application of the notion of lived experience in the context of social policy research and practice.

The utilisation of the concept of 'lived experience' in social policy has been applied across a breadth of studies, including those with a focus on the experiences of energy. Such studies have been noted throughout the thesis already, and have included a focus on more conceptual work, for example in characterising energy vulnerability (Middlemiss & Gillard, 2015), as well on particular demographic groups consider 'at risk' of fuel poverty. Examples include young adult households (Butler & Sherriff, 2017), older households (Willand & Horne, 2018), social housing tenants (Longhurst & Hargreaves, 2019), among others. Middlemiss *et al.* (2018) have argued that designing fair and effective energy policies require a better understanding of the lived experiences of energy poverty and vulnerability (Middlemiss *et al.*, 2018).

There are a number of key strengths in adopting such an approach in the field of social policy. Firstly, is its ability to provide insight of the 'shared typical' (p.449), where:

> "…forms of lived experience can be usefully understood as involving clusters of commonality and shared intersubjective experiences. These are not so unique and individualised as to be out of the reach of a social policy researcher and can form the basis from where we can find recurring patterns and typical forms of behaviour and concerns (Prus, 1996; Schutz, 1988)" (MacIntosh & Wright, 2018, p.459-460)

This is not pursued with the aim of generalisation, as is the intention in positivist research traditions, but instead, draws on the notion of typicality in the sense that some meaningful conclusions can be drawn in relation to lived experience that is contrasted and compared for a group of individuals in similar situations. Drawing out commonalities in lived experience enables us to reflect on how such experiences are situated within "prevailing forms and trends" (MacIntosh & Wright, 2018, p.458). It additionally allows for the exploration of ways in which lives are shaped and mediated

by policies and practice, such as that provided by frontline agencies and services (including the provision of energy advice).

However, as MacIntosh and Wright (2018) point out, there has, to date, been little engagement in discussion as to what 'lived experience' means or implies, despite gaining such popularity among social policy scholars and beyond in, as they refer to it, the 'real world' of social policy (p.2). They note that while the "idea of lived experience can be both intuitive and useful" it simultaneously has the "potential to seem vacuous or contradictory – what is experience if not lived?" (MacIntosh & Wright, 2018, p.2). A key critique is that often the notion is adopted with little attempt to situate the concept within its theoretical and methodological origins. In the present research, the notion of lived experience adopted is that which has emanated from the philosophical tradition of phenomenology, with a more specific focus on phenomenological psychology as a form of interpretivist inquiry. Acknowledging this as a critical component of employing the notion of 'lived experience' in an empirically meaningful and methodologically sound way, the theoretical and methodological origins of this research approach have been explored in-depth, as set out in the previous section.

4.3 Turning to research methods

4.3.1 Research Design: Choosing the research contexts

A significant aspect of this research, discussed in length in Chapter Two, is a recognition of and interest in the experiences of energy-related advice and support that occurs not only *within*, but also *beyond* formalised settings. As such, this overarching research aim became a significant influence in the development of the research design, resulting a goal to gather views that extended beyond an energy

advice organisation alone. As a result, early in the development of the research design it was decided that a range of settings in which energy-related advice and support occurs would be examined and these were informed by earlier work exploring contexts such as mundane and online spaces, discussed in Chapter Two. Based on this, three distinct settings were considered: (1) a formal energy advice organisation, (2) energy advice in 'mundane' settings, and (3) energy advice in online spaces.

The table below (Table 4.2) introduces more specifically the three contexts selected for this research and the method or 'technique' (Kothari, 2004) employed to generate data.

Advice Context	Recruitment setting	Method
CONTEXT ONE: Energy advice in a formal advice organisation	Energy Advice Service	Semi-structured interviews with clients (advice-seekers) and paid and voluntary staff (advice-givers) of a formal energy advice service
CONTEXT TWO: Energy advice in 'mundane' settings	Mundane settings	Semi-structured interviews with householders who have experience of providing or being supported by members of their immediate interpersonal network.
CONTEXT THREE: Energy advice in online spaces	Online spaces	Semi-structured interviews with informal actors who had experience of energy-related advice online

Table 4.2: Overview of research design

4.3.2 Sampling strategy

Qualitative methodologies utilise smaller samples to better understand rich, detailed accounts of subjective experience, and how individuals make sense of such experiences within their talk (Sullivan, Gibson & Riley, 2013). Such methods can be time-intensive for the researcher and yield large quantities of data (Sullivan, Gibson & Riley, 2013). Baker and Edwards (2012) note that "because qualitative research is exploratory by nature, qualitative researchers may not know how much data to gather in advance" (p.5). In agreement with this, one view is that the 'optimal' sample size in qualitative research is identified during data collection, once data saturation has been achieved (Guest *et al.*, 2006). As outlined by Bertaux (1981), one method of achieving data saturation is to continue generating data until patterns across participants' experiences can be found.

Langdridge (2007) outlines that in phenomenological research one of two approaches to sampling are typically adopted. The first – *maximum variation sampling* – involves seeking out participants who share a common experience but vary in terms of representing a broad range of demographics. This technique is commonly utilised in descriptive phenomenological research (Polkinghorne, 1989). In interpretivist phenomenology, such as that adopted in this research, a purposive sampling strategy is employed, where there is typically less variation across the sample and participants are purposively recruited based on aspects of shared experience (Langdridge, 2007). With the present study, this involved recruitment of individuals who had experience of energy-related advice and support in (at least) one of the three settings.

With the research design setting out three varied contexts in which energy-related advice and support takes place, the sampling approach initially sought to analyse segmented data sets from each of these three contexts, bringing together the analysis

as a whole at the end. It was envisioned that this would enable some reflections of how advice and support are experienced across these settings. However, as interviews were undertaken, it became clear that people's experiences of energy-related advice and support were not isolated to one context or another. Most described turning to formal organisations and services, as well as family or friends, and all but three discussed use of the internet in navigating advice and support for energy-related problems.

Similarly, it was initially envisioned that the sample would include those who had given advice and those who could be identified as advice recipients. Even with the six interviewees employed as energy advisors, all but two had experience as providers and recipients of energy-related advice and support. Expectedly, however, *advisors* fell more predominantly into the former group and *householders* in the latter, hence the distinction in presenting the findings here and in the following chapters.

Ultimately, the research design around the three contexts became less about a rigid approach to recruitment, instead providing a useful analytical lens to consider context not as a defining aspect of a particularly lived experience, but as a way of understanding where and how different experiences were embedded in place. This will be drawn out in discussion of formal and informal spaces through the findings chapters.

4.3.3 Participant recruitment

Participant recruitment took place across the North West of England: a region where fuel poverty is most prevalent according to government statistics (BEIS, 2020). Interestingly, in a recent review that aimed to map energy advice services (see

Chapter Two) the North West was identified as having the highest proportion of energy advice provision (Broman, Sage & Bridgeman, 2020).

Adopting, as noted, a purposive sampling strategy, and intending to recruit individuals with experience of energy-related advice and support in a formal context, the first stage of fieldwork involved contact with a formal advice organisation - Citizens Advice Manchester – which operates a dedicated energy advice service across Greater Manchester. At a national level, this organisation is the main provider of energy market advice and fulfils the function of statutory consumer watchdog for energy consumers in the UK (Centre for Sustainable Energy, 2020). Meetings were held with the organisation during the planning stages of the research where relevant advice, guidance, and support regarding the study was provided.

Once ethical approval (Appendix 1) had been granted, research posters (Appendix 2) were displayed in the general waiting area and in each of the private consultancy rooms. Displaying posters in private spaces (as well as or instead of in public spaces) has been considered an important aspect of participant recruitment, providing individuals who may wish to participate the opportunity to do so, without having to show an interest publicly. As Ritchie *et al.* (2013) notes, this approach is particularly critical when conducting participant recruitment in public spaces, especially those where attendance unrelated to the research "may itself be a source of anxiety" (p.95).

In addition, through the attendance of local events and staff meetings held by the organisation, further opportunities to publicise the research were identified. There was also scope to utilise the organisations' website and social media platforms in order to generate a wider awareness of the research, although this was not used in the end. Participant information sheets (Appendix 3) were made available at the organisation and throughout the duration of the fieldwork.

Participant recruitment outside of the formal energy advice service took more time and required an increased level of active promotion of the research across a range of settings. Initially, this involved contact with key services and organisations working locally and further afield with the main advice organisation. The participant recruitment posters which were displayed in the organisation (as well as in other relevant local organisations), outlined that a researcher was interested in speaking to people who have either received or given advice regarding an energy-related problem, but did not specify whether this is in a formal capacity or otherwise. In a couple of cases, snowball sampling resulted in word-of-mouth contact by existing participants, however, initially participant recruitment in 'mundane settings' was slow.

In response, two further recruitment posters/flyers were designed (see Appendix 4) and placed, with permission, in a range of 'everyday' settings, such as launderettes, cafes, and libraries. In the literature, such settings have been referred to as third spaces, or as hidden spaces of coping with energy vulnerability (Ambrose *et al.*, 2020).

Promotion via social media channels, again using networks and suggestions posed by the energy advice service, as well as directly posting (with organisational approval where required) on existing online forums, resulted in three interviewees presenting as having direct experience of energy-related advice and support online.

4.3.4 Using semi-structured interviews

Qualitative interviewing, regarded as a "*conversation with a purpose*" (Burgess, 1984, p.84), is one of the most commonly used methodological techniques in qualitative research (Mason, 2002). In contrast to more structured, generally positivist methods, such as large-scale surveys, which have been characterised as "*broad surveys of*

surface patterns" (Mason, 2002, p.41), researchers using qualitative interviews assign importance to the 'depth', 'complexity' and 'roundedness' of data.

There are different styles of qualitative interviews, with the most common categorisations being 'unstructured', 'semi-structured', and 'structured' (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). This study will utilise semi-structured interviews, sometimes referred to as 'loosely structured' (Mason, 2002), in which a small number of 'direct questions' are used only as a means of guiding the interview, and thus maintaining a sense of freedom to allow unanticipated responses to emerge. Overall, adopting this technique is said to provide the researcher with "*the means to access and explore subjective experience*" (Sullivan, Gibson & Riley, 2012, p.104), a central focus of the present study.

The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were audio recorded with the consent (Appendix 5) of the interviewees. Audio recordings not only work to ensure that accurate reflections and interpretations of the participants' accounts can be included in the analysis, but also offer the researcher a greater sense of freedom during the interview and the flexibility to fully engage in interviewer-interviewee interactions (Sullivan, Gibson & Riley, 2012). As noted by Halcomb and Davidson (2006), the use of audio recordings can work to reduce interviewer bias, allowing the researcher "to reflect on the conversation to ensure that the meanings conveyed by participants are adequately represented" (p.41). Other benefits have been identified, particularly where audio recordings have been able to inform and support ongoing researcher development, reflective practice, and supervision – all key aspects which have also been noted in the literature (Fasik, 2001). Further, hand-written reflective notes were taken briefly during each interview, and in more substantial detail immediately afterwards.

4.3.5 Developing the interview guide: pilot interviews

Semi-structured interviews are typically guided by what Willig (2001) terms an 'interview agenda'. As noted, this commonly involves formulating a small number of questions, often further supported with sub-questions or 'prompts', which together serve as a discursive guide for the interviewer. As the term 'agenda' suggests, this is not a rigid list of scripted questions that should be asked verbatim, in the same order and same way during each interview, but instead operate as prompts or signposts, providing a sense of overall direction for the interview. In terms of Burgess' (1984) definition, this helps to ensure that 'purpose' of the conversation is maintained. Sullivan, Gibson & Riley (2012) assert that one of the major benefits of using an interview guide is to ensure a balance between 'researcher-led questions' and 'participant-led issues'.

A key aspect of preparing to undertake fieldwork therefore focused on the development of the interview guide, particularly in terms of the content and structure of the interview, where careful considerations were made throughout the research design and fieldwork as to its effectiveness and appropriateness. As part of the development of the interview guide, three pilot interviews were completed. Sampson (2004) discusses the usefulness of 'pilots' in qualitative research, noting that the benefits in taking such an approach extend beyond the opportunity to revise and refine research instruments, also benefiting the research in terms of: "foreshadowing of research problems and questions", "highlighting gaps and wastage in data collection", and in "considering broader and highly significant issues such as research validity, ethics, representation and researcher health and safety" (Sampson, 2014, p.383).

Following the completion of the three pilot interviews, a supervision meeting was held to review the efficacy of the interview guide as a data generation tool and to discuss

any identified issues, as well as some focus on early interpretations of the data. This allowed the interview guide to be reviewed and, where appropriate, adapted to reflect any key issues or respond to any key themes identified. It should be noted, however, that only a small number of modifications were made (for example, in use or addition of prompts and with the ordering of questions). Because only minimal changes were made, the two 'pilot' interviews have been included in the final data set. The final interview guide has been included in the appendices (Appendix 6).

4.3.6 Ethical considerations

Adhering to the principles and good practice outlined in the British Psychological Society's *Code of Ethics and Conduct* (BPS, 2009), ethical approval was granted by the University of Salford's Research, Innovation and Academic Engagement Ethical Approval Panel (see Appendix 1).

All participants were provided with a participant information sheet (Appendix 3) and offered the opportunity to ask questions and take time to consider their participation before agreeing to an interview. Additionally, all participants provided written consent at the time of participation (Appendix 5) and were made aware of their right to withdraw from the research at any time without needing to give a reason and without consequence. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, all participants have been given a pseudonym and care was taken to remove any additional identifying information (for example, in the use of quotes).

4.3.7 Evaluating qualitative research: reflexivity and trustworthiness

Reflexivity

A crucial element in undertaking qualitative research involves engaging in reflexivity, which as Langdridge (2007) describes is a "process in which researchers are

conscious of and reflective about the ways in which their questions, methods and very own subject position might impact upon the psychological knowledge produced in a research study" (p.58-59). A critical part of this, according to Langdridge (2007), is the way in which reflexivity is demonstrated to those reading research where it is considered "important to inform the reader of the position of the researcher with regard to the specific topic being studied" (p.61). This section acknowledges the importance of this in offering some reflections as to researcher positionality and reflexivity. Although this section is situated within the middle of the thesis, it is important to note that the process of reflexivity occurred throughout, beginning prior to research design, through fieldwork, into analysis, and in the later stages of writing up the findings and producing the overall thesis. Throughout the completion of this research, a research diary – regarded as "a valuable tool, prompting insights which informed a variety of methodological and theoretical decisions" (Nadin & Cassell, 2006, p.208) – was maintained. Alongside field notes, the research diary played a particularly valuable role during analysis.

Langdridge (2007) distinguishes between three types of reflexive practice: the personal, the functional, and that which might be considered disciplinary in nature. Personal reflexivity relates to the researcher's subject position, in terms of race, gender, class, and sexuality. Markers of age, gender, race, and class all emerged in the interviews, particularly those with households where lived experience was contextualised in this way. These markers were not only drawn upon by the interviewers in reference to their own subject positions, but also to that of the researcher they were disclosing their stories to. Reviewing the research diary and in the analysis of the transcripts, it could be noted that the researcher as a young(er), white, professional, female were markers picked up on by a number of the

interviewees. This was mostly done to position stories providing a basis for comparison or, more often, in highlighting difference, for example "speaking to a female" and "just like I'm speaking to you now" (Luke, a male interviewee).

The process of personal reflexivity was not just entangled in the explicit interactions with the interviewees. It involved private reflections as the interviewer and researcher which, as noted, were recorded in a research diary kept to varying degrees of intensity throughout the research. One 'position' is worth noting here. Identifying as a working-class female raised in a lone parent household, a number of the interviewees described their current or past circumstances as similar, and shared powerful and often difficult stories related to challenges of raising children while managing the home alone and for most with low income. Care was taken in the interviews and in the analysis to be cognizant of this shared experience in the interpretation of the data. To engage actively and openly with reflexivity in this regard, details were discussed with supervisors as part of meetings focused on the analytical process.

Another way in which personal reflexivity is understood is in relation to insider/outsider researcher standpoints (Qin, 2015). This has particular significance in the present research, where, as noted in Chapter One, it was part motivated by professional experience as an advisor supporting those living through and responding to challenges associated with fuel poverty and other issues. Working for the organisation used to recruit participants provided obvious benefits in terms of trust and access – they were able to act as gatekeepers (Namageyo-Funa *et al.*, 2014) and provide additional guidance as to the development and completion of the research. However, in interviewing the energy advisors, the position of insider was particularly visible. A number of the energy advisors interviewed made references such as "you'll know this" or "you'll have seen this before" which may suggest the narratives shared were

constructed or edited in a way which responded to this assumption that the interviewer had knowledge or awareness of the topic under discussion. On the one hand, this could have meant certain details were left out in the sharing of stories based on this assumption. On the other hand, seeing the interviewer as a fellow advisor, not as other, could have resulted in more detailed or open disclosures.

Functional reflexivity relates more to influence in one's role as a researcher on the research process and decisions made (Langdridge, 2007). Again, as noted in Chapter One, the expertise and experience applied and developed in this research is partially the result of a previous postgraduate research degree focused on fuel poverty and situated at the intersection of psychology and social policy. As such, there was an immersion in the field and the literature at the outset, which as noted created an awareness that in research and policy energy advice provision was underexplored and undervalued. This means that research decisions related to the topic and the sample are partly influenced by the literature, but also by professional experience in this field.

Another key reflection in terms of functional reflexivity worth noting here comes from the pilot interviews, and specifically with regards to assumptions held going into fieldwork. Although this relates less to the interview guide itself and more towards the way in which the interview is carried out, it became clear that some of the content of the interview guide had been influenced by the literature. The main example of this is in relation to an interest in 'expertise' and consequently in how interviewees may or may not have talked about 'expert' and 'non-expert' identities. As a result, care was taken to remain flexible and open to broader understandings and experiences of expertise, which was not mentioned explicitly, and how these may relate to energy-related experiences also. For example, in the pilot interviews a number of what could be considered 'expert' identities separate to that as an 'energy expert' were discussed,

including: as parents, as graduates, and as the person mainly responsible for household finances, among others.

Bell (2020) notes that to engage in reflexive practice is "to think about ourselves in the research and how we influence it; and how we can interact meaningfully in the activities related to the research without being exploitative and causing harm" (p.17). Langdridge (2007) echoes this in highlighting the especial importance when research seeks to study vulnerable people and communities, as in the present research. This was the most important element of reflexive practice in undertaking this research. As an experienced researcher in this area, but more specifically as a person with longstanding experience as an advisor, the approach to recruitment and fieldwork dedicated time and care to acknowledging this in particular. One aspect of this approach was ensuring that the research interview did not veer into the line of questioning that might be typical in an advice interaction. However, in having the expertise and experience as an advisor, where certain issues arose, these were carefully noted to allow appropriate signposting after the interview had been completed. In terms of gathering and responding to often difficult and highly emotional stories detailing poor quality housing, family struggles, debt, and ill-health, for example, the expertise and experience as both a qualitative researcher and an advisor resulted in a position of feeling well-equipped and capable of being sensitive yet appropriate. Both roles have many professional similarities in terms of communicating vulnerability. Regardless, as noted, throughout this study the use of the research diary and regular supervisions were critical.

Trustworthiness

Alongside reflexivity, the concept of trustworthiness in qualitative research is widely regarded as a fundamental component in examining and determining the quality of the

research undertaken (Elo *et al.*, 2014). Evaluation criteria have been developed to explore trustworthiness, with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) contribution one of the most widely utilised. They propose four elements to the assessment of trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, dependability, conformability and transferability. As Elo *et al.* (2014) note, a fifth component – authenticity – was added in 1994.

Drawing from the work of Forero *et al.* (2018), and Elo *et al.* (2014) in developing this to include the fifth criterion, the table below (Table 4.3) sets out the definition and purpose of each criteria and original strategies used to meet these criterion as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Drawing the focus to the present research, the third column of Table 4.3 sets out the specific details of the strategies applied in this research. In taking these steps, this highlights how the research sought to address and respond to a number of limitations, such as the extent to which findings may be regarded as credible, dependable or transferrable to other contexts and topics.

Rigour criteria	Purpose	Original strategies	Strategies applied in this study to achieve rigour
Credibility	To establish confidence that the results (from the perspective of the participants) are true, credible and believable.	• Interview process and technique	• Interview guide tested and adapted based on three pilot interviews
		• Collection of referential adequacy materials	• Collection of fieldnotes taken throughout and referred to in analysis
		• Peer debriefing	• Regular follow-up during fieldwork and analysis with supervisors and peers. Participation in early career workshops and events.
Dependability	To ensure the findings of this qualitative inquiry are repeatable if the inquiry occurred within the same cohort of participants, coders and context.	• Rich description of study methods	• Detailed methods chapter presented
			• Detailed protocol and clear research instruments (e.g., interview guide) created (see Appendices)
		• Establishing an audit trail	• Detailed records of fieldwork maintained
Confirmability	To extend the confidence that the results would be confirmed or corroborated by other researchers.	• Reflexivity	• As detailed in the section above, but exercised throughout all stages of the research
			• Specifically achieved through maintenance of a research diary and regular supervisions
Transferability	To extend the degree to which the results can be generalized or transferred to other contexts or settings	• Purposeful sampling to form a nominated sample	• A purposive sampling strategy was employed as detailed in Section 4.3.2
		• Data saturation	• As detailed in Section 4.3.2
Authenticity	To ensure that researchers fairly and faithfully show a range of realities.	• Sampling	• Transparency in presenting sample
			• Highlighting diversity and commonality across sample
			• Highlighting adaptations in research strategy (e.g., changing from a segmented approach to analysis)
		• Reflexivity	• Reflexivity as evidence of research authenticity

Table 4.3: Establishing rigour

4.3.8 Introducing the interviewees

This research draws on the views of twenty-four interviewees, six of whom worked for an energy advice service (referred to hereafter as the *advisors*). The remaining eighteen interviewees – referred to as *householders* – were those with direct experience of 'getting' energy advice and support, whether from formal sources (such as trained energy or welfare advisors), informal others (such as relatives, friends, or online forums), or a combination of both. As noted, however, while the sampling approach initially sought to analyse segmented data sets based on whether a participant had experience of giving or getting energy advice and support, as well as reflecting different contexts, the reality was that all but two of the interviewees (and this included the energy advisors) shared their experiences of both, as advisors and advisees, as the providers and recipients of support. Expectedly, however, *advisors* fell more predominantly into the former group and *householders* in the latter, hence the distinction in presenting the findings here and in the following chapters. Important to reiterate at this point, all of the participants have been assigned a pseudonym and care has been taken to remove any identifying information.

Table 4.4 (see page 120) introduces the eighteen householder interviewees, providing detail relating to their circumstances at the time of being interviewed[5]. To protect the anonymity of the energy advisors, a general introduction to this smaller sub-sample (6) will be set out here but not included in the table. Many of the advisors shared details of their personal circumstances and related this to their experiences of professional practice as energy advisors, and because of this the socio-demographic detail has relevance. All six energy advisors were full-time employees of a well-known energy

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[5] Interviews were completed in two waves of fieldwork: in February 2017 and between February and April 2018.

advice service based in the North West of England. All but one lived in the private rented sector, with one living in a social rented property. Four lived as part of a couple, one lived with a friend, and one lived alone.

Ten of the interviewees identified as male (three of which were energy advisors) and fourteen as female (again three of which were energy advisors). Interviewees' ages ranged between 24 and 83 years old, and all lived in the rented sector, with the majority (18) reflecting on their experiences as current private rented sector tenants. Household composition varied with just over half (13) living alone. Nine were living as a couple, with or without children, and one interviewee was cohabiting with a friend. Two householders were lone parents, but others living alone at the time of being interviewed also shared in-depth stories of their past experiences as lone parents. All but one of the householders were in receipt of at least one means-tested benefit (a widely utilised proxy indicator of low income), however all discussed financial strain at the time of being interviewed whether relating to debts or a struggle to pay essential bills (i.e., energy), or a combination of both.

All interviewees were responsible (solely or jointly) for the energy bills in their households and for choosing their energy supplier, tariff and payment method. In terms of paying for electricity and gas (no other fuel types were noted), notably all of the energy advisors paid via a credit meter, whereas the majority of householders (12) paid via prepayment meters.

Pseudonym	Age	Tenure	Household composition	Electricity	Gas	Employment status	Long-term health issue and/or disability
Jean	54	SH	Single adult	PPM	PPM	Long-term sick leave	Yes – physical and mental health
Charles	69	PRS	Single adult	CM	CM	Retired	Yes – physical
Luke	38	PRS	Single adult	PPM	N/A	Long-term sick leave	Yes – physical and mental health
Darius	36	SH	Single adult	PPM	PPM	Long-term sick leave	Yes – physical and mental health
Theo	29	PRS	Single adult	PPM	N/A	Unemployed	Yes – mental health
Celeste	40	PRS	Couple	CM	CM	Long-term sick leave	Yes – physical and mental health
Martha	44	PRS	Couple; two children	CM	CM	Unemployed	None disclosed
Elizabeth	36	PRS	One adult; five children	CM	CM	Self-employed	Yes – mental health
Celine	59	PRS	Single adult	PPM	PPM	Long-term sick leave	Yes – physical
Jess	33	PRS	Couple; one child	CM	CM	Long-term sick leave	Yes – physical
Holly	38	SH	Couple; two children	PPM	N/A	Employed	None disclosed
Patricia	71	SH	Single adult	PPM	PPM	Retired	Yes – physical
Pippa	62	PRS	Single adult	PPM	PPM	Long-term sick leave	Yes – physical and mental health
George	68	PRS	Single adult	CM	CM	Retired	Yes – physical
Tom	26	PRS	Single adult	PPM	PPM	Unemployed	None disclosed
Michael	37	PRS	Single adult	PPM	PPM	Long-term sick leave	Yes – physical and mental health
Dora	47	PRS	One adult; two children	PPM	PPM	Long-term sick leave	Yes – physical and mental health
Joyce	83	SH	Single adult	PPM	PPM	Retired	Yes – physical

Table 4.4: The Sample

PRS = Private rented sector; SH = social housing; CM = credit meter; PPM = prepayment meter

4.3.9 Analysis

In this final section of Chapter Four, the analytical process will be set out. It will discuss the background to the analytical approach adopted, drawing on the principles of a narrative thematic framework, and outline the practical steps taken in undertaking the analysis.

A narrative thematic approach to analysis

As discussed, this research has adopted an interpretivist epistemological lens underpinned by a phenomenological framework. As Georgi and Georgi (2003) outline, with a focus on *meaning* and *experience*, phenomenological research aims to "capture as closely as possible the way in which the phenomenon is experienced within the context in which the experience takes place" (p.27). Various methods can be used to study social life phenomenologically, however, in data analysis the focus is on "rich descriptions and narratives that can illuminate the lived world" (Davidson, 2013, p.320).

The methods adopted in this research have been chosen to generate qualitative data which reflects 'rich description' and 'narratives' of energy vulnerability within the context of energy-related advice and support. As such, Ricoeur's (1980; 1984) work on phenomenology and narrative, discussed in detail in the first half of this chapter, are particularly relevant in outlining the approach to data analysis presented here. Within this philosophical framework, 'narrative' has been defined as the "fundamental scheme for linking individual human actions and events into interrelated aspects of an understandable composite" (Polkinghorne 1988, p. 13). Expanding on this, Davidson (2013) draws the focus to the use of 'stories' in making sense of or understanding the meaning of lived experience. In this framing, temporality is central to understanding experience, as is an interest in the construction of identities within the stories we tell.

All of these aspects further illustrate the appropriateness of this philosophical framework, and associated analytical approaches, for the present research.

Considering the above discussion, a narrative thematic analytical framework has informed the analytical approach adopted in this research (Esin, 2011; Reissman, 2008). It is important to note however, that 'narrative analysis' refers not to a single method of analysing data but more appropriately to a range of analytical approaches that can be understood as situated on a spectrum from the structural to the thematic (Esin, 2011).

Principles for adopting a narrative-thematic approach to data analysis has been said to allow for the exploration of "both the individual experiences and social processes that shape these experiences" (Esin, 2011, p.95). The thematic model to analysing narratives is underscored by a focus on 'content' (the 'what' is said'), instead of, as with other narrative analytical approaches, on structure and sequence (the 'how' it is told). As Esin (2011) describes, this analytical approach is concerned with "the 'told' rather than the aspects of the 'telling'" (p.107). As such, this approach is said to be particularly well-suited to analysing a wide range of 'narrative texts', including interview transcripts.

Discussing the benefits in taking such an approach, Esin (2011) outlines that this approach is useful for analysing across a number of cases, where the aim is to identify common themes or patterns. In grouping common thematic areas, the approach has been critiqued, however, for its inability to make claims related to 'meaning', where what may be meant in one case (i.e., for one participant) is not necessarily the same for another. Esin (2011) outlines that to overcome this, the narrative thematic analyst should make "nuanced, well-illustrated descriptions of the thematic categories, including the contextual details of the interviews" (p.108).

Essentially, this study takes the subjective accounts of energy-related advice and support as instances in which narratives of energy vulnerability are constructed and co-constructed. It seeks to generate a better understanding of how this is made sense of in relation to one's identity, particularly in relation to that as either an 'expert' or 'non-expert'. Furthermore, energy-related 'stories' produced in such interactions allow individuals (and the narrative researcher) to explore "social conditions and power relations that shape the narratives" (Squire, Andrews & Tamboukou, as cited in Esin, 2011, p.92). Considering the above elements, this analytical approach is considered to be well-suited to a study exploring the issue of energy vulnerability and the process of energy advice and support, where both can be regarded as complex social experiences, involving multiple social actors and perspectives, and situated within and impacted by wider political and policy contexts.

Analytical approach

Centred on the narrative accounts of energy vulnerability and the social process of energy advice, data analysis was guided by a narrative thematic methodological framework (Esin, 2011; Reissmann, 2008), as discussed above. Having outlined the analytical framework adopted in the research, the following section will briefly discuss the practical stages of the analytical procedure.

Esin (2011, p.108) categorises the narrative thematic approach into four stages, which are set out in Table 4.5 below.

Analytical stage	Description of process
Selection of the subtext/segments	Written data (i.e., transcripts) are brought together an analysed at first in relation to the research question(s). From this, relevant sections are marked and assembled to create a new 'subtext' – in other words, a separate file where the most relevant data is separated from the overall narrative.

Definition of the thematic categories	Next, themes or perspectives are identified within the 'subtext' and, as Esin (2011) notes this can be in the form of words, sentences or groups of sentences. There are various approaches to developing the themes which can be pre-defined by theory or arrived at through processes of repeated reading of the data. The latter approach has been chosen for the present analysis, where a number of broader categories were developed at first and then reviewed in an iterative analytical process
Sorting the material into categories	Once themes or categories have been identified, sentences or 'utterances' are selected from the data and assigned to the relevant categories.
Drawing conclusions	Lastly, the 'narrative content' grouped under each of these categories or themes, are used to illustrate and inform the more detailed description and discussion of the meaning.

Table 4.5: Overview of the analytical process

Introducing the main themes

Guided by the research questions (below), three main themes were developed from the analysis and these are presented in table below (Table 4.6). In considering, in the broadest sense, *how people experience energy-related advice and support*, and how *effectiveness* is understood in this context, the three overarching thematic areas call particular focus to: *problems, people,* and *process.*

1. How do people experience advice and support for energy-related problems?

2. What role do other actors play across formal and informal settings?

3. What shapes and hinders effectiveness of energy advice and support across formal and informal settings?

4. How is the relationship between the formal and informal in the context of energy-related advice and support understood, and what are the implications for policy and practice?

Theme 1 – *working with 'tellable' energy problems* – explores three key problem areas that were the dominant ways in which the interviewees framed energy-related

problems in their narratives of energy vulnerability. Their experiences of energy-related problems surrounded affordability and debt, health impacts or improvements, and energy uses.

Theme 2 offers a key contribution to a small but growing evidence base that examines the role of social relations in the context of energy, in this case in the lived experience of energy vulnerability and related advice and support. Exploring the role of others and of the self and valued identities, a typology is set out. Use of a typology draws on a well-established analytical tool for forming concepts and exploring dimensionality (Collier, LaPorte & Seawright, 2012).

Theme 3 shifts the focus to *effectiveness*, addressing more specifically research questions 3 and 4 by exploring the experiences of the *process* of energy-related advice and support, and what factors shape or hinder such understandings.

CHAPTER FIVE: PROBLEMS **Working with 'tellable' energy problems**	
Theme One: Tellable Energy Problems	
Problem areas	1. Affordability and debt
	2. Health
	3. Being '*care-fuel*': energy use
CHAPTER SIX: PEOPLE **Acknowledging key relations and identities**	
Theme Two: The role of others (and the self)	
Roles and relations	1. Experts
	2. Allies
	3. Peers
	4. Antagonists
	4. The self and valued identities

CHAPTER SEVEN: PROCESS	
Effective advice as meaningful, situated, rhetorical	
Theme Three: *Effectiveness*	
Determinants	1. Time and place
	2. '*Those three words*': communication
	3. Emotions and trust
	4. Effectiveness as elusive

Table 4.6: Main thematic categories and sub-themes

4.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter, presented in two parts, has outlined the methodological approach to the research and the research methods or 'techniques' which have been used to conduct the study. The chapter began by situating the decision to adopt a qualitative approach within the context of existing research, as well as outlining the epistemological and ontological frameworks which underpin the inquiry. Next, the focus turned towards the more practical aspects of the study, discussing the research contexts chosen, the role of ethics, the tools and techniques used to generate data, and the approach to sampling and participant recruitment. The chapter concludes by introducing the analytical approach adopted in this research and has also outlined the procedural steps taken in analysing the data, the findings from which will now be covered in the subsequent three chapters.

Chapter Five: Tellable Energy Problems

5.1 Introduction

Aimed at developing a better understanding of the way in which 'effectiveness' is understood in the context of energy advice and support, the analysis is presented across three findings chapters that focus on: energy *problems*, energy and *people*, and the energy advice and support *process*. Each respond, in a distinct yet interconnected way to the overarching research question that examines how people experience and navigate energy-related problems and related advice and support. This chapter focuses on the first of these three thematic areas: energy problems.

The interviewees discussed a wide range of issues and challenges that could be characterised as experiences of energy vulnerability (referred to throughout as energy problems for clearness) and tied these to their experiences of related advice and support. The problems encountered are detailed throughout this chapter, and included energy debts and affordability, supplier issues, concerns with thermal comfort, problems with energy services and household appliances, and energy-related ill-health and impacts on wellbeing, among many others.

One thing highlighted in the interviewees' accounts, both of the householders' direct personal experience and the energy advisors' extensive professional experience, was that dealing with a single problem, energy-related or otherwise, was a rarity. Due to this, it was common for the interviewees to describe a process of disclosing (householders) or uncovering (advisors) a range of problems, with a specific energy-related problem situated somewhere within these wider accounts. This, as will be set out in the following section, involved processes of foregrounding and backgrounding different issues: at times energy was the main, presenting issue, at others, it was less

pressing against other problems, such as those related to benefits or housing. This led to a consideration of what problems people share as well as how they share or present them, and what this means in terms of how lived experience is shaped and mediated by policy and practice (MacIntosh & Wright, 2019). Given the focus of the research, this chapter concentrates on energy specifically, and as the title notes, the concept of 'tellable' energy problems. In other words, it explores the sorts of energy problems people encounter, how they are framed, and what this indicates about the strengths and limitations of related policy and practice.

After introducing the concepts of tellability and presenting problems, what follows is a discussion of three prominent ways in which energy problems were framed: paying for energy, the impact of energy problems on health and wellbeing, and energy use and saving.

5.2 Presenting problems and tellability

> *A lot of my clients, it's through helping them with other issues and when you get talking and then kind of find out, especially if they're coming in with money problems and then you look at how much they're spending, and what you spend on gas and electric, do you get the Warm Homes Discount, do you know about this, and oh you've got debt so we can look at payment plans or trust fund applications normally to try and clear arrears. But most of, a lot of the time they might have come in because you know their benefits have stopped or something like that and not necessarily looking for energy advice.* (Andrew, advisor)

The energy advisors noted that in their professional roles supporting a person with a single issue, energy-specific or otherwise, was a rarity. As highlighted by Andrew's

quote above, energy-related problems could often not be the main or initial issue that people came into contact with the service for help with. The householders similarly highlighted that their experiences were typically for support with a range of different problems encountered simultaneously and often intertwined, and often the first interaction, whether this was with a relative, advice service, online forum or other source of support, did not focus, initially at least, on an energy-specific issue. In other words, energy problems were often backgrounded.

Regarding what is foregrounded, then, in the context of formal advice provision, this often focuses on the 'presenting problem' (Citizens Advice, 2016). A term commonly adopted in training guidance, it refers to an initial acknowledgement of the main or sole issue put forward when seeking advice or support. While a holistic, all-encompassing approach to formal advice and support is typically the goal, the presenting problem is a key part of any initial assessment used to identify appropriate next steps (Citizens Advice, 2016). It also provides insight into processes of prioritisation when seeking advice and support, and in dealing with varied and complex social issues.

With regards to energy advice research, acknowledging the importance of the presenting problem has significance in terms of adopting a client-led approach, as discussed earlier in the thesis, where contact is initiated by the householder who is therefore considered already motivated to act (Darby, 1999; Boardman & Darby, 2000). As such, the advisor can be thought of as working in response to the presenting problem. A similar reflection of this can also be noted in wider advice literature where (a lack of) responsiveness to and a rejection of unsolicited advice and support is found. Understanding the problems people want advice and support with is a key element in

ensuring effectiveness, linking closely to ideas around how best to communicate and meaningfully engage with others in efforts to alleviate fuel poverty.

Much like a 'presenting problem', as referred to in policy and practice discourse, a similar concept – 'tellability' (Norrick, 2000) - can be found within narrative research, more specifically within analytical approaches to working with narrative accounts. This relates to the process of foregrounding which stories to tell. In analysing narrative accounts, the notion of 'tellability' is drawn upon to examine how individuals negotiate what stories or aspects of stories to share. What makes a story 'tellable' requires evaluation on the part of the teller in terms of interest and relevance, as Labov (cited by Norrick, 2000) states, and this "depends not only on the (detached) content of the narrative but also on the contextual (embedded) relevance of the story for the participants involved" (Norrick, 2000, p.134). In this way, sharing stories (for instance, of the lived experience of energy vulnerability and related advice and support) involves a careful process of assessing what to tell, how to tell, who to, when and where. This draws out and enables an exploration of the storyteller's awareness of expectations and what determines an 'appropriate experience', revealing that some stories, for some people, in some situations are not told because they are deemed 'untellable'. Here, theoretical links between tellability (in narrative research) and face threat (in advice research) can be noted. In relation to this, Norrick (2000) develops the concept of 'tellability' further describing it as a 'two-sided notion': on one side, as noted above, is the risk of sharing a story that lacks significance or relevance, on the other – referred to as the dark side of tellability – is the risk associated with sharing stories that transgress from social norms, often intimate, personal, and shameful. Understanding what energy problems are deemed tellable therefore has significance.

At the centre of this research is a focus on better understanding the concept of 'effectiveness' within the context energy advice and support, and more broadly in terms of efforts to alleviate energy vulnerability and fuel poverty. As detailed elsewhere, the effectiveness of advice and support in the context of alleviating energy vulnerability partially depends on the ability to identify and develop methods of meaningfully engaging with people. This thesis argues that this begins with an understanding of the types of problems people face, how they navigate living with such challenges, and the ways in which they want to be supported, if at all. Advice resistance, particularly in response to unsolicited advice and the implications of face threat, has been the subject of much research beyond the energy domain, as outlined in Chapter Three. More context-specific research examining energy advice, such as that set out by Darby (2003), has similarly highlighted that where support is client-led it is considered to be more effective. Theoretical implications are important here, too, with the second tenet of Goldsmith's Communication Model of Advice asserting the importance of the 'situational' nature of advice meaning that an awareness is required of what advice and support is appropriate and when. Whether positioning 'effective' advice as solicited, situational, client-led, or a combination of these things, a bottom-up, in-depth qualitative exploration, rooted in the views, beliefs and perceptions of those with direct experience is valuable, such as that presented here.

5.3 Framing energy problems

Drawing on the overlap between the notions of 'tellability' (in narrative research) and 'presenting problems' (in policy and practice), the following sections will provide a discussion of the dominant ways (see Table 5.1) in which energy problems were foregrounded by the interviewees. These are presented within three overarching frames: (1) paying for energy, (2) energy and health, and (3) energy use and saving.

Theme One: Tellable energy problems		
Needing help	Problem areas	1. Paying for Energy
		2. Energy and Health
		3. Being '*care-fuel*': Energy use and saving

Table 5.1: Theme one - problems

5.3.1 Paying for Energy: debt and prepayment meters

> *[What is] the main thing that we deal with? Just in the broadest sense are people who can't afford their electricity or gas bills and have gotten into arrears and they can't afford to pay back the arrears.* (Henri, advisor)

The most prominent way in which the interviewees talked about energy (and energy-related problems) was in relation to paying for it. This was primarily in terms of the methods of paying, the inability to pay, or the consequences of non-payment. The collective view of the advisors mirrored that of Henri above: energy, for most of those he supported through the energy advice service was simply not affordable. The householders echoed this, and almost all disclosed consequent problems with energy debt - some resolved, some ongoing, and, in several cases, debts that had been wrongly issued by the energy supplier. The narrative accounts shared by the interviewees not only revealed the lived experiences of the struggle to afford energy and related debt, but also illustrated many ways in which such experiences are shaped and mediated by (mostly but not exclusively energy) policy and practice (see McIntosh & Wright, 2018). Examining ways in which paying for energy was framed as a tellable energy problem, this section draws focus in two key areas. The first more focused on the experience of policy and practice, specifically around energy debt recovery processes, and the second more psychological, with a consideration of the power of the prepayment meter.

The battle ground of energy debt

In the UK, it is estimated that one in ten households are living with energy debt (Vasquez, 2018). This equates to some 1.3 million electricity and 1 million gas accounts in arrears with more than £1 billion owed (NEA, 2020). Both the number of accounts with arrears and the amount of debt owed has risen in recent years, and against the backdrop of COVID-19, where household income has reduced and domestic energy use has increased, the situation is expected to worsen (Brown *et al.*¸2020; Citizens Advice, 2020).

Among the interviewees, energy debt was the main way in which energy was described as problematic; as noted, almost all of the householders divulged current or past experience of dealing with an energy debt and all of the energy advisors regarded this as one of the main elements of their routine work. The experiences of energy debt shared were less focused on living with debt or the causes of the energy debt, and were, instead, dominated by talk of the debt recovery process. As Lomax and Wedderburn (2009) set out, energy or fuel debt, which can act as an indicator of fuel poverty risk, is typically triggered in one of two ways, either from the: "supply side (incorrect or irregular bills, for instance) or from the householder (high heating needs, householders' lack of engagement in their finances, mismatch between bill cycle and personal financial cycle)" (p.8). While the interviewees discussed elements of the latter, issues with the former – the supply side – were the dominant focus.

From the professional and personal experiences shared, the most prominent challenge related to the practices and processes of debt recovery, specifically in dealing with energy suppliers[6]. This was an area of policy and practice perceived to

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[6] Interviewees referenced several different large and smaller suppliers, and the data did not focus on any one in particular. As such, supplier names have been removed to protect the anonymity of the

be failing consumers with the accounts detailing insensitivities, inconsistencies, and inefficiency. Energy advisors explained that their work extensively involved (re)negotiating energy debt repayment plans, adopting the role of a middleman between the supplier and consumer and typically coming in to provide additional or remedial advice and support to counter that provided initially by the supplier.

> *…a lot of what we do is like negotiating with energy companies about what is the absolute minimum that we can have the client pay back towards these arrears…there's a lot of negotiating in terms of that.* (Henri, advisor)

This part of the energy advisors' work was typically described as responding to energy-related problems that should or could have been resolved through prior contact with the supplier but had not been, and in some cases responding to interactions that had made a situation worse. This was strongly rooted in perceptions of the householder-supplier relationship being characterised by mistrust, wasted contact, and missed opportunities. Important to note here, particularly in the context of understanding householder engagement, is that these examples shared by the interviewees referred to householders having sought advice and support not once (typically with their supplier first) but twice (with the energy advice service). With the second attempts following from failed first attempts, this evidences a frustrated experience of energy advice and support: problems are often not resolved at the first point of contact or with the first source of support. While this research notes the experiences of those who went on to seek advice and support from a second source, there is likely many other who did not and therefore endure the struggle of unaffordability of debt repayments. The wider ramifications of this (i.e., the way in which policy and practice surrounding

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interviewees primarily and to ensure the focus remains on the experiential accounts themselves and not the specifics of any supplier complaints.

debt repayment shapes householder experiences of living with debt and fuel poverty) seemingly presents an area which has received little attention to date.

Energy advisors explained that the reason their professional practice was dominated by renegotiating energy debt repayment was due to flaws in the process of determining a household's ability to pay. Throughout the interviews there was extensive evidence of repayment rates being set too high:

> *So, the suppliers just tend to put a recovery rate of about £10-£15 a week on the meter, whereas the min rate of recovery is £3.70. [Energy supplier] has slightly higher rates, its £4 and £4.50 for, I can't remember which way round it is, one is for gas and the other is for electric. But all the other suppliers, their lowest recovery rate is £3.70, and they tend to set their recovery rate a lot higher, which they don't take into account the affordability at all. Where if they just asked the simple question of 'what's your income?' then that would be obvious that they couldn't afford that in the first place so people wouldn't be self-disconnecting because they can't afford to pay the debt.* (Andrew, advisor)

While in agreement with her colleagues that much more could be done by energy suppliers to provide effective advice and support, Phoebe, another energy advisor, explained that assessing household income and the intricacies of this, particularly for those in receipt of different benefits, was not an easy task:

> *Because generally people don't know what income they are receiving. They might think they are receiving DLA at certain rates but they're not, or they might think they are on income support but they're not there on ESA. And that massively changes the advice that we are giving. Or if they're on JSA and they've got health problems they should be claiming ESA, and we might help*

them to appeal. You know there are loads of issues around that as well.

(Phoebe, advisor)

This speaks to a recognised complexity found in the social security system more broadly (Summers & Young, 2020), where policy striving for simplicity may "be justified from an administrative perspective but [is] not experienced as such from the perspective of claimants, who instead can face greater responsibility for managing complexity" (2020, p.169). Although the study by Summers and Young (2020) focused on Universal Credit claimants, the experiences of those dealing with energy debt, as shared by the interviewees here, similarly show that the responsibility of managing complexity (and the consequences for failing to manage this) sits primarily with the householder.

Alongside issues associated with specificity and accuracy in disclosing household income, it is possible that stoicism – not in terms of thermal comfort, but in terms of financial security and wider problems - also plays a part. Some of the householders were keen to emphasise in the interviews that in their current situation they were without a need for further advice or support: "*all manageable at the moment*" (Darius, householder) and "*it's been absolutely fine*" (Patricia, householder). However, when analysing the interviews as a whole many problems, energy related or otherwise, were in fact unresolved and the interviewees in many cases were still struggling. While this is not to suggest that fault lies with the householder in terms of their ability to pay being incorrectly assessed, it does highlight significant issues related to process, particularly in terms of how 'effective' communication functions. In a policy context dominated by a focus on eligibility where much relies on income status, what factors enable or constrain the process of disclosing and assessing household income accurately? Whether personal or procedural? Specifically, in the context of fuel poverty and energy

advice and support, how can balance be achieved between administrative and experienced complexity?

Ultimately, however, the general view was that dealing with the energy supplier contact centre regarding energy debts was extremely problematic. Phoebe, an energy advisor, explained the importance of going into what was described as a negotiation armed with the correct information. This was perceived as a level of preparedness that would be awkward and not typical for the everyday experience of the householder:

> *So if I contact the supplier for example I would straight off give a meter reading and I don't tell them what I'm doing because I don't want them to anticipate what they are going to offer me, I want to find out what the consumption is first so I give a meter reading and ask them to tell me how much the consumption is and how much the arrears is, and then I already know that and I have that in mind so I can negotiate around that rather than phoning up and saying I need a payment plan and they give me a ridiculous plan and I don't know if that's correct or if I can get a lower one or whatever. So, knowing full well a client wouldn't know to do that, it's just some simple things like that.* (Phoebe, advisor)

Effectively providing energy-related advice and support related to energy debt was, for Phoebe, like a game or battle. There was a sense that negotiating energy debt repayment plans, and the specific instances of communication around this, would result in winners and losers, rather than a process of working together with the shared goal of dealing with the debt in a way that is amenable to all involved. This misalignment of what a successful outcome looks like in terms of dealing with energy debts and the specific interactions that take place was noted by other interviewees, also. For Annabelle, who had a similar experience of 'struggle', this related a view that energy debt recovery was target-driven:

And they have targets - energy companies - to get money back, because that's their job like any customer service job is to recover debt or set up payment plans, and they have targets to meet. So, with that in mind a lot of clients they do struggle because they kind of can't meet the criteria of that person who they are speaking to on the phone and then they don't get help at all. So, they're screwed basically. (Annabelle, advisor)

As with Elizabeth's experience detailed at the start of this chapter, the interviews revealed that on a number of occasions energy debts had been wrongly issued, or the amount of arrears was later found to be incorrect. This again signals to the value in examining how lived experience is shaped and mediated by policy and practice (MacIntosh & Wright, 2019), here in relation to the recovery of energy debt, to better understand effectiveness.

…always when the clients come in, they've had a nightmare. Recently [energy supplier] had this problem with their bills, [another energy supplier] might have had the same but the thing was they were sending out like five bills and so we tracked them by looking at someone's online account. And this one guy he's got like five bills in December and one of the bill's was for £900. And they got cancelled later and then when I rang to speak to them, they were like, 'yeah if you just ignore the cancelled ones' and then, and I was like, 'how can you?'. So, I made them send me a printout of like minus'ing off the ones that would been cancelled and all this sort of stuff, so it was just a system error and problems with the system. And they will never apologise to the client - saying you know I owe £3-4k and then when it came down to it, he owed nothing. He went from £4k to nothing. (Bella, advisor)

The interviewees' accounts suggest that energy debt and the practices associated with collecting energy debts represent a significant problem area in policy and practice. As MacIntosh and Wright (2019) highlighted, analysis that brings lived experience to the fore enables us to examine the ways in which lives are shaped and mediated by policy and frontline practice. Drawing out aspects of policy and practice in this context, the evidence here suggests that the way in which energy debt is handled, chiefly by energy suppliers, is exacerbating and prolonging the experience of energy vulnerability. Initial contact seeking support is ineffective and opportunities to remedy forms of energy vulnerability (i.e., energy unaffordability and debt) are being missed. Substantial work has been undertaken to examine how best to reach the hardest-to-reach (for example, Ambrose *et al.*, 2019) and more broadly to better engage energy consumers, but the evidence here points to a major issue being that where people are reaching out, they are then not being adequately assisted.

The power of the prepayment meter

> *…it was a real struggle at one time, as I say. I was stuck between can I eat, and can I afford [the heating], because I had one of those key meters.* (Charles, householder)

Intertwined with many of the interviewees' experiences of energy debt, whether to avoid or deal with it, was the experience of paying for energy through a prepayment meter (PPM). While the energy advisors, and many of the householders, took a clear view that a PPM was the less desirable method of paying for energy, because of its implications for affordability, the rationale for opting to pay this way was typically accepted and done so with a level of understanding and compassion. Notably, the energy advisors paid for their own energy supply using a credit meter, while twelve of the eighteen or two thirds of the households had a PPM. Drawing on the experiences

of the energy advisors and the householders specifically in relation to PPM use and energy affordability, this section considers some of the drivers and motivations behind this rationale.

As noted, the main reason why householders had a PPM was to avoid or manage energy debt. However, related to failings in the effectiveness of assessing a household's ability to pay, there were numerous examples shared of how repayment of debt using a PPM worked against, rather than aiding more effective debt recovery. As Charles' experience outlines:

> *I ran up a debt with the electricity company because basically, I couldn't afford to pay the bill so I would pay a little bit each time but then the debt mounted each time. and they [energy supplier] said if you want to pay it off bit by bit then you could pay it off using a key meter. And then every time you top it up with the key, we will take a little bit off the debt. so that meant I was paying over, more than I needed, or could afford, and so I couldn't pay off the debt, it became more and more, never ending, and it just seemed to mount, the debt just sort of hovered where it was really.* (Charles, householder)

As Andrew, one of the energy advisors, outlined, the stress of the 'unexpected energy bill', similarly noted in other research (De Haro & Koslowski, 2013; Butler & Sheriff, 2017; Longhurst & Hargreaves, 2019), was a key deciding factor in opting for or keeping a PPM:

> *Clients, quite often if they are struggling financially, then they are on prepayment meters, either they've had debt and they've come out and fitted the prepayment meter, or it's been left from a previous tenant, or they're so worried about getting into debt that they will opt for the prepayment meters so that they*

know exactly what they're spending. It's probably too complicated otherwise, you get unexpected bills, you don't know how to work it out - how much it's going to cost you. At least you know as that thing is ticking down, how much you are using. (Andrew, householder)

Bound up in the worry of the unexpected bill, other factors were noted. Complexity in dealing with the alternative, for one, can be regarded as a motivating factor. With a credit meter comes the requirement to deal with energy bills, argued by many to be unnecessarily complex (Brühl, Smith & Visser, 2019). The nature of opting for a prepayment model also enable a greater sense of control – the unexpected is removed. Paying upfront via PPM has traditionally been the only way in which a householder can monitor costs closely with regular checks of the meter. Smart metering and use of in-home displays enable this with the credit meter function now but awareness and acceptance of this is far less established than with PPMs. Another psychological difference in monitoring cost between a PPM and a credit meter is that the former involves a "*ticking down*" of money already spent versus a building up of money that will need to be paid with the latter.

Feeling bound contractually and how this limited control and flexibility also played a role. For Celine, the experience of a friend regarding this was enough to deter a switch to a credit meter, despite this being described as preferred method of payment:

Celine (householder): *She struggled financially, she really struggled. She said, you know, once she was binded into that contract to go with direct debit, there was nothing she could do about it. and she said she did have to go without. So, it would be better to underpay, that over, she thought, to star with and then catch up. The fact they took so much, she was so shocked. And, like*

I said, it did balance itself out after about three months. But when you've got three children to support and you're on a minimum wage it's difficult

Danielle (interviewer): *And feeling binded into that contract?*

Celine: *Yeah, locked into that contract, that's what has put me off. I would prefer to go direct debit on both of mine, but my concern is with it being a vast amount and when you're on your own and you're on a low wage and you've already got other commitments. At the moment, I pay for it as I go.*

The majority of examples discussed were tied to the strain of household finances whether this was low income, higher energy costs because of health or other household needs, debt, or a combination of these and other factors. However, this was not always the case and at times the interviewees alluded to the significance of the relationship with the supplier in the payment method used. Throughout this chapter, and elsewhere in the literature, the consumer-supplier relationship is regarded as poor and one characterised by mistrust and unreliability. Documenting a particularly extreme example, Phoebe recounted how, with one of her clients, a disputed debt followed by the installation of a PPM had resulted in prolonged self-disconnection as a form of protest:

Danielle (interviewer): *And why had he stopped paying for energy?*

Phoebe (advisor): *Because he didn't agree with the debt. And to be honest he said he doesn't need it and he probably doesn't need it If he's not used it in a year, but you know…. But he does have gas central heating, so my problem is with that one.*

Phoebe's client suffered with serious respiratory ill-health, and this encapsulates a sense of powerlessness, where a form of resistance involved prolonged self-

disconnection from an essential service. This demonstrates the extent to which individuals may be prepared to suffer detriment as a way of exercising a degree of power. The refusal to use the PPM that had been fitted because of debt signals a complete disengagement and detachment from the supplier – and ending of sorts of the consumer-supplier relationship. What this example highlights, although extreme in nature, is that PPM, and the act of self-disconnection, also means little or no contact with the energy supplier. Set against the experiences shared throughout this chapter, in problematic dealings with energy suppliers, this adds a consideration to the wider rationale for choosing to pay by PPM, an aspect that has received much less attention compared to budgeting and cost implications. Alongside a perceived capacity to budget with greater precision and ease, to what extent does the relationship with the supplier and an avoidance of contact with them factor into the decision to pay using a PPM? For Phoebe's client, this was significant.

Brought together, the interviewees' accounts present a number of factors relevant in developing a more nuanced understanding of a householder's rationale for opting to pay for energy via a PPM. These are summarised in Figure 5.1 below and as noted, were common features of the interactions in energy advice and support. As such, they offer valuable insights into the specifics of understanding the drivers behind PPM use as a tellable energy problem, which bears relevance to policy and practice targeted at PPM users.

Prepayment meter		Credit meter
No bill or an annual statement where no action is required	**Billing practicalities** ←→	Complex bill where action is required
Ability to carefully and regularly monitor without a billing cycle	**Monitoring of costs** ←→	Awaiting unexpected bill with billing cycle over long period
Ticking down	**Perceived impact of use on cost** ←→	Building up
More of an 'arm's length' transaction, little or no contact required	**Contact with supplier** ←→	Authoritative, sends bill with payment demand
Immediate control over cost	**Initial transition** ←→	Settling in period to work out use/cost
Choose payment amount	**Payment arrangements** ←→	Told payment amount
None	**Risk of building arrears** ←→	Sufficient to result in worry/fear

Figure 5.1: Summary of differences in psychological framing of PPM versus credit meter

5.3.2 "I don't mind because it is a health thing": Energy and health

The impact of our environment, the spaces in which we live, work and play (Pulido, 1998), and our experiences and perceptions of these spaces have direct consequences for our health and wellbeing (Bell, 2020). This was reflected heavily in the interviewees' accounts and forms the second dominant way in which narratives of energy problems and the experiences of advice and support were framed. Energy problems, whether related to being cold or cut off, dealing with damp or debt, were linked to worsening health and wellbeing; conversely, efforts to alleviate such problems, through advice and support, resulted in, often quite dramatic, improvements to self-reported health and quality of life by the interviewees. Like affordability and

debt, the relationship between energy and health was a major part of energy advice work: "*health conditions a lot of the time. A lot of very vulnerable people*" (Andrew, advisor).

Health did not form part of the sampling criteria when inviting interviewees to participate in the research and was not a direct line of questioning in the interviews themselves. However, almost all of the interviewees, including two of the energy advisors, discussed significant challenges associated with health and wellbeing. This related to a wide range of specific mental and physical health conditions, many of which have received considerable focus in fuel poverty research and policy, such as the respiratory condition Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease. Health and wellbeing was primarily talked about in one of two ways: (1) as a tipping point that triggered a person to seek out or be referred into energy-related advice and support, usually following the onset or worsening of a condition due to an energy-related problem, or (2) as a frame for communicating the positive impacts of energy-related advice and support (i.e., "because of the energy advice my health is now much better") that was commonly rooted more broadly in narratives of how circumstances had improved. Taken overall, this demonstrates the relationship between the experiences of energy problems and health and wellbeing: the greater the intensity or severity of the experience of energy problems, the worse interviewees found their health and wellbeing to be, whereas lessening or removing the experience of such problems resulted in health-related improvements.

As with the previous section that focused on paying for energy, this section draws out several ways in which the interviewees framed their experiences of energy problems and related advice and support - this time framing such experiences around health and wellbeing.

Health and household finance are commonly understood as difficult conversational topics, with both linked to stigma and shame whether internalised or experienced (Mickelson & Williams, 2008). This has implications for understanding the experiences of advice and support. The relationship between stigma and the disengagement from and non-uptake of a range of services, including advice provision, is well-established in research (Andelic, Stevenson & Feeney, 2019).

The interviewees talked extensively about both and did so specifically in relation to energy: in terms of paying for it (as discussed in the last section) and in relation to health, their own and that of other household members. Interestingly, however, as suggested by one interviewee, Celeste, in communicating energy-related problems and a need for help, health, not money, may be the preferred, or less stigmatising, way of framing the conversation.

> *… [talking about money] not as easy I think. I think health-wise, I don't mind because it is a health thing. People look at you and they, well, feel for you. But with the money, I don't like people, other people worrying. Because we used to, we still do, but sometimes my friends take me out, they'll make a plan and we'll go out, you know, to make the days I'm feeling well, they say 'oh well you are feeling well, we can take you out'. But I don't like telling them about my money because, I don't know. Money - I think it's my only issue. And I don't want them to be thinking, 'oh god, she can't afford it."* (Celeste, householder)

For Celeste, who described receiving advice and support from a range or sources including the Citizens Advice energy team, her supplier, friends and relatives, there was a greater sense of shame around talking about the financial aspects of her

situation. The quote above illustrates this in relation to interactions with her friends, but this was similarly the case with the energy advisor:

> *I was a bit, em, I was a lot embarrassed because the amount of the debt. But he said, ' you know what, I've seen worse'. At first, I thought it might just be to make me more comfortable, but then he told me that really, he had seen a lot worse than these, so this is, don't worry about it.* (Celeste, householder).

As well as feelings of stigma or shame, described as 'embarrassment', Celeste notes worry around being a burden on those who may provide support, in this case her friends. This is perhaps an important aspect in the preference for a health-framing of disclosing energy-related problems, over a financial-framing, in that the supportive actions of others are arguably more limited when it comes to health. With financial hardship, specifically in the experience of informal sources of support, money can be offered and often is, as other research exploring the lived experience of energy vulnerability has highlighted (Middlemiss & Gillard, 2017; Butler & Sherriff, 2017). The same approach cannot be taken when disclosing a health problem: good health cannot be shared informally or accessed via social support or charitable grants.

Another distinction to note relates not to possible solutions but to the cause of the problem and draws on the notions of agency and structure (Orton, 2009). Specifically, this considers whether the problem being disclosed is understood as a result of individual action and behaviours (i.e., blaming oneself and identifying as at fault) or social structures that constrain the ability to act (i.e., having no 'choice' and not being at fault). Orton (2009) found that with personal debt and issues with household finance individuals would blame themselves for non-payment or not seeking support. For health, however, research has found the opposite to be the case with evidence pointing less rigidly to a position of blaming oneself (for example, Marzouk *et al.*, 2019).

In terms of common energy-related problems, this suggests greater ease, and therefore an avenue to engage more meaningfully, in communicating those framed around health than household finance.

That said, health status could also be problematic in terms of providing the most effective energy-related advice and support. Health was not always easy to talk about and at times could be the reason for disengaging with support. Regarding older, retired households specifically, but also more broadly related to individuals who might be claiming benefits for the first time. Annabelle, an energy advisor, explained that actively disclosing, or failing to effectively hide, the health impacts associated with energy problems (i.e., underheating the home) risked exposing a starker vulnerability than being cold or sick because of the cold: the inability to live and care for oneself independently.

> *There's a few like if you have the disability benefits already then you get the premiums - I mean you must know this - you get premiums on top like with pension credit and getting those premiums is quite a big thing. And, also for people claiming attendance allowance because they've never claimed benefits, so they don't know that that's there. And convincing them to do it sometimes it's quite hard because they are so independent. You either get people going, 'yeah brilliant I'll do it' or you get people saying, 'I don't need support'. But 'from what you've told me, actually, you know you've told me that it takes you much longer to do things, you don't necessarily get support that'…and I think people are scared of it sometimes because they think if they apply for it will mean that they will be made to get care. Because they are at the age now where 'if they know If I'm struggling as much as I am then it will be a problem' and so they connect it with social services.* (Annabelle, advisor)

This highlights the delicate and vital work of benefits advice and wider narratives of being in receipt of benefits, within and beyond the context of supporting those living in or at risk of fuel poverty. Approaches to income maximisation, referred to throughout the interviews with advisors as 'benefits checks' were a key part of their role and initial contact with clients of the advice service, as Annabelle - "*benefit checks for everybody*" – and Arthur – "*80% of clients have some sort of problem with benefits – suspended, or sanctioned, or benefit checks*" – highlighted. As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Seven, which focuses more specifically on understanding the effectiveness of the energy advice process itself, an appreciation of and sensitivity to the reasons why advice might be rejected or not sought in the first place (as outlined by Goldmsith, 2004) is critical to reaching those often referred to as the hardest-to-reach and ultimately effectively addressing key social issues, such as fuel poverty.

Managing health is energy intensive

Another way in which energy narratives were framed around health related to the management of health conditions. Living with health issues, whether physical, mental, single, or multiple, was energy intensive in a range of different ways and required, in some cases, resourceful yet troubling mechanisms of coping. Of the 18 householders interviewed, 15 disclosed health problems and of these most offered examples of how their health resulted in additional energy needs.

Charles, who had been diagnosed with COPD a few years earlier, described a particularly difficult experience in not being able to afford to top up his PPM because of energy debts and therefore unable to use an electric-powered nebuliser to administer the medication required to manage his respiratory condition. Despite being resolved at the time of interview following a referral to the Citizens Advice energy

advice service, this led to a significant worsening in his health and wellbeing, causing panic and repeated instances of hospitalisation. As he explained:

[after self-disconnecting] well, at the time, I was using what was called a nebuliser which is a thing that delivers a medicine through a mask. I don't actually need that anymore, but at one time I was actually quite bad and the nebuliser you have to plug it in to get it to work, so if the electricity is run out, I couldn't use my nebuliser, so I was in a bit of a panic. And this was one of the reasons, actually, that I had to be admitted to hospital again and when they discovered this, they were kind of, the people at the hospital were a little bit angry with the power companies that they had put me in that situation. So that was [energy advisor] that got that sorted, got me a new meter so that I was on a quarterly meter, a quarterly bill rather than a key meter. and one of the reasons that I was able to do that was because [energy advisor] helped to clear the debt for me. (Charles, householder)

Charles was not the only householder to highlight the constant mental strain of the PPM in relation to energy needs more closely associated with health. For Luke, who had been recovering from a major surgery to his leg while managing severe depression and anxiety, the stress associated with money on the meter related directly to his ability to keep clean as well as warm:

I am always watching the meter to see if it's all ok, that I've got enough electric on to have a shower or to have a hot bath or put my, I need to put, that's the other thing that helps my leg, because, you know. Having to keep clean. And you know, it's cold and I get cramps and spasms and things like that…If I don't keep my leg clean and wash myself I just, I kind of like go, my mental state, I feel like you know totally messed up. (Luke, householder)

In relation to the problems associated with energy needs and use, or energy vulnerability, Luke talked in much greater detail about the management of his mental health than his physical health. However, for those that disclosed physical and mental health issues, both were inextricably linked, with the status of one impacting the status of the other. Luke had been diagnosed with severe depression and anxiety years prior and talked at length about being isolated from family and friends and how this had, at the worst times, led to suicidal thoughts. As the above quote indicates, for Luke, having hot water and being clean was as important as, if not more than being warm. Like Charles' past experience, Luke had energy debts being collected through a PPM which he could not afford to maintain. Again, as with Charles, repeated hospital admissions created additional problems for Luke with regards to topping up his PPM, and ultimately, though not immediately, resulted in contact with an advice service. For Charles, there was no alternative to the nebuliser, so a deterioration in his health was, in some ways, more visible. For Luke, one coping mechanism, somewhat invisible and extreme in nature, involved using plug sockets in the shared foyer area to the block of flats he lived in to address additional (and basic) energy needs and attempts to manage his health. As he explained:

> *…sometimes, they've got electric plug sockets outside, I've used the extension lead when I have been really bad, like. And just to make myself a drink or something or like I said, to heat the kettle up. And I've washed out of a bowl and things in the past. I'm trying to, you know, but it's been pretty bad at certain times where I've had to boil the kettle outside to get hot water and then do that without being embarrassed and that. Without any one being there at certain times and then I'll just do, and that's just one thing…basically, I got behind with the electric and the rent and the council tax and I told them this, that I was in*

hospital and stuff. And that was when I was really, really bad. And when I came out, I was like, I didn't have nothing, there was no heating, there was nothing to drink, I'd just had, like I said I boiled the kettle outside to have hot water. To keep myself clean because that was my main priority. And charging my phone to get in touch with the ambulance, just in case something happened again. (Luke, householder)

Another interviewee, Celine, shared her experience of additional energy needs, in terms of doing laundry and staying cool, and therefore managing higher energy costs that were linked to managing her health and comfort while undergoing treatment for cancer:

Having cancer and being off work for twelve months was very, very difficult. Very difficult. There was a grant from [charity] at the time and part of that case was around doing laundry more and using a fan more, it was summertime, so it was not about staying warm. And I must admit, it wasn't as easy as they make out to get, it took an awful lot of chasing up to get help. I thought there'd be, well, instant help through charities. There wasn't. (Celine, householder)

While domestic heating is understandably an important area of focus in fuel poverty research and policy, particularly in the UK context with a colder climate and in relation to the important role of heat decarbonisation as part of the low carbon transition, what these three examples highlight is that additional energy needs, and heightened energy vulnerability, as a result of poor health and wellbeing are about much more than warmth alone. For Charles, it was to administer medicine; for Luke, it was cleanliness and hot water; for Celine, it was about laundry and keeping cool. This demonstrates a need for continued efforts to broaden the conversation around how best to effectively

support households experiencing forms of energy vulnerability, and in doing so, to draw on the perspectives and everyday realities of householders themselves.

Energy, health and wellbeing

In reframing the home as a space of 'energy wellbeing', Waitt and Harada (2019) describe energy use and billing as embodied in that it is lived and felt. This was similarly noted by the interviewees and touched upon through this section in terms of associated feelings of stress, anxiety, stigma and shame, as well feelings of ill-health attached to diagnosed health conditions. However, managing energy vulnerability and health was also described as being felt in another way: energy in the wires had links with subjective energy levels. For Charles, as detailed below, the greater the stress around managing energy needs and use, the less energy he felt he had:

> **Charles (householder):** *It's actually quite debilitating because you have to be very careful about any energy you expend, you have to think twice, it's not just a case of, 'have I got the money to do this', it's a case of have I got the energy to do this. So, on days like that I would tend not to go out, I would wrap up, I'd be sitting around, sitting in the flat with my coat on. On some occasions, I would actually have to go and visit a neighbour if they were there and sort of hang around with them. But it is very difficult, very difficult indeed. As I say, it is a real struggle. Your energy levels go right down because you are not eating properly and you're constantly cold and it is quite a miserable situation. So, as I say, it's a case of not doing anything, conserving your energy as much as possible, going to bed early, or if, you know, there is a neighbour in or friend you can go and stay with for the day. Just go and sit round their house for the day and just use it, you know, it's just…but it is very, very debilitating and it's very limiting.*

Danielle (interviewer): *and is it mainly the heating that you would miss, when times were tight with what money you could put on the meters?*

Charles: *yeah, because I mean you can exist on a restricted diet, but when you are cold, when you are constantly cold, it is actually physically debilitating, it kind of rots your energy if you're not warm. And if you're cold all day it can make you quite vulnerable so that was the most difficult thing, being cold a lot of the time, through the winter.*

What this shows is that wellbeing can be communicated and explored through our experiences of not only managing energy, but feeling energy, and not just in relation to feeling cold or warm. Energy levels, in this case, offer some indication as to Charles' assessment of his home as a space of 'energy wellbeing', in this case performing badly and impacting upon his health and wellbeing.

Considering this further and focusing on the positive impact of advice and support in terms of alleviating forms of energy vulnerability, the quote below, from Dora, demonstrates how, in contrast to Charles situation, reducing stress around energy resulted in her feeling less 'lazy', more motivated, and, ultimately, healthier and more well.

…this is my goal to go back to health, then go back to voluntary work somewhere. And you know what, since I've been ill, I have not been that person, not able to look up or pick up a phone and look into things. And the internet? I have been so...I'm not lazy, I don't like calling myself lazy, but you know, health-wise, you kind of get that you don't like doing things, it kind of puts you off because of your mood and stuff. But since my things [energy debts] have been

sorted out, my burdens have gone. I feel lighter. I think I need to do that; I can

do this; I can still do that. And my doctors are happy, yeah. (Dora, householder)

Several interviewees expressed that their health and wellbeing had improved as a result of the advice and support received to address or overcome energy and other related problems. Interestingly, for three householders, Charles, Luke, and Celeste, a key marker of this improvement to health corresponded with a return to a more creative past self.

For Luke, being free of energy debts and better able to manage his health meant a significant improvement with his mental health and he had consequently taken up art again:

I do paintings, drawings, pencil work, um, things like that. Ink and pastels and

stuff. So, I've not done anything for quite a long time and I've just started doing

that again. (Luke, householder)

For Celeste, who talked at length about connections to her family and activities they would do together and for one another, this involved a wide range of different creative outputs, including setting up a shared social media page with her sisters that focused on thrift-like behaviours and tips, all positive markers of the experience of home:

…[it's] five friends, five sisters, I don't know what our name is at the moment,

but we're gonna put all the checks, recipes, things we can make, things we can

sell, because bless my sisters, we are all very hands on with things. (Celeste,

householder).

There were other ways in which Celeste had reconnected with her 'creative self' as a result of feeling well, and this was particularly meaningful in that it provided a renewed sense of being able to provide, to contribute, to give back to loved ones who had been

a key source of advice and support through her problems with energy debt and in times of ill-health:

> *Whenever I feel well, I kind of cook for them. And I'm good at sewing, so I make, my friends like, whoever has kids, they like me to make them a little duvet, like a duvet or some mats, or stuff. So sometime, I do that so it kind of works for me then. I do something for them.* (Celeste, householder)

Charles explained that, in retirement, his evenings were often spent working on poetry, but that his experiences of self-disconnection and consequent poor health had not only impacted his ability to focus on his work but has also affected the quality and tone of his writing. Noting a shift to feeling healthier and better, he explained why he believed this had occurred:

> *My creative outputs, yes, have become a little bit more positive and you know the focus of what I am writing has sharpened up. Erm, I suppose because I feel a little bit more in control of my life, so everything becomes a little bit more positive, a little bit sharper, a little bit more determined and, you know. I don't feel like a victim these days and that's really good.* (Charles, householder)

All of these examples were described as taking place in the home, showing that not only had health and wellbeing improved, but there was also a sense of the home being considered more of a safe space, a sanctuary in which some of the interviewees felt a sense of going beyond surviving, but once again being able to create. This consideration of basic needs being met and a resulting situation in which the physical and mental space to engage in once enjoyed hobbies and activities opens up lends itself well to the psychological framing around Maslow's hierarchy of needs (McCleod, 2018). According to this model, once basic needs, such as warmth, food, and security,

are met, a person can then attend to other, higher-level needs related to notions of belongingness, esteem and, importantly here, of self-fulfilment. Many studies have assessed the effectiveness of various fuel poverty initiatives on health in relation to changes in the number of hospital admissions or GP visits, but the data here shows there is value in understanding and examining wider, less commonly referred to markers of good health and wellbeing, with self-reported indicators around self-fulfilment, such as habits and hobbies being one possible approach.

5.3.3 Being Care-fuel: Using and saving energy

"…you must be the home guard you old flap-duster…this [government] letter says we've all got to be care-fuel, I'm sorry I mean careful. Every bit of gas we save in the home means more gas and coal to make munitions in the factories…put on two pairs of winter woollies and do without a gas fire…never wash up under a running tap…use less water in your bath…and don't use the oven for only one dish – that's slap-ovenry. Do you understand?"

(Extract from UK wartime radio comedy *It's That Time Again*)

The third way in which energy narratives were framed related to energy use, specifically in terms of the interviewees' views of appropriate, conservative, and 'care-fuel' use of energy and energy saving in the home. Energy advisors and householders talked at length about actions and behaviours to adopt cautious energy use, sharing numerous examples of tricks and techniques for efficiently using and where possible saving energy. Energy use in the home was an important topic of discussion, seemingly about more than saving energy as a mechanism for saving money or the impact on health. This was not exclusively the case, however, and, at times, using less or little energy was presented as problematic, particularly in the context of effectively

providing energy advice and support in efforts to alleviate energy vulnerability. This section, as with the previous two sub-sections, will draw out key findings in relation to the way in which narratives of energy vulnerability and related advice and support were framed around using and saving energy.

Reclaiming 'thrift' and working class environmentalism

Bell (2020) argues there has been a longstanding failure to recognise working class people as environmentalists, despite this group typically carrying the greatest environmental burdens in society and often being disproportionately affected by policy. A clear example of the latter is that of the poverty premium where, concerning energy, it has been estimated that those on the lowest incomes pay in excess of £300 more per year for the same energy services as those on the highest incomes (Corfe & Keohane, 2018). In a call for a more just, fair and inclusive environmentalism, Bell (2020) refutes the prevailing view that "poorer people are too preoccupied with meeting their basic needs for food, warmth, security to be able to think about, or be active on, environmental issues" (p.20), including energy conservation in the home. The accounts shared by the interviewees support Bell's critique, with numerous examples of those living with low and strained incomes demonstrating environmental awareness and action, that was not solely or principally motivated by the prospect of saving money.

Householders discussed with confidence and ease the many ways that they not only coped with challenging restrictions around energy use and cost, but also the ways in which they actively employed and shared tried and tested mechanisms of being thrifty, efficient and ecological. Martha, for example, a 44-year-old mother of two, articulated consciousness of this as part of her normal everyday routine, expressing that energy

saving was not felt as a hindrance and even at times aligned with her preferences (i.e., using candles for lighting):

> *I've just always been conscious of what I'm using. I just don't use things for the sake of it, you know, some people just have the heating on 24/7, they do this, they do that. And as I say, I am just conscious of what I use and make sure lights are switched off at night. I only have one small lamp on. Apart from that, I have candles, which I like anyway. And it's just switching off, switching things off at night when you go to bed, make sure everything is switched off at the plugs because you'd be amazed how much it uses when you're asleep.* (Martha, householder)

As Bella, one of the energy advisors, explained, energy saving discourses often formed a key part of energy advice interactions, adopting, in some way, a position of 'lead by example':

> *Yeah, and sometimes telling them these are the changes that I've made to my flat. And that does help. If you just say to them you know make sure you've got your energy efficiency light bulbs and that sort of stuff you have to go, you have to tell them what you've done or what their mates have done or, and then they'll say 'yeah, I know I know I've done that'. I tell everybody this - I've got a draft excluder that my mum made me years ago out of a pair of old jeans and it's just jean legs stuffed with old sucks and it looks like somebody's lying down behind the door. But it's quite funny and so tell everybody just you know stuff some old jeans full of socks and then look yeah that's the draft excluder and you just put it at the bottom of the door. And I think that gives them a visual thing to do it.* (Bella, advisor)

Bella described this approach as helpful in her work with clients of the energy advice service; being accessible in sharing a level of personal narrative, relatable in highlighting her own engagement with energy saving, as well as knowledgeable, helps to situate the energy advice within the context of (her) everyday life. This example also illustrates how notions of thrift were often positioned within wider accounts of energy saving and avoiding wasteful uses of energy, a common feature across several of the interviews. For Bella, this involved the retelling of old family story with her Mum repurposing trousers for use as a draft excluder. This low or no cost approach is a low-tech, inclusive, workable, while somewhat light-hearted suggestion that has the potential to alleviate some element of lived energy vulnerability. In considering the interaction between thrift and energy saving, this example speaks to the reclamation of 'thrift' set out by Hulme (2019): it is not rooted in moralistic discourse or wedded to the binary of 'anti' or 'pro' consumption, and instead focuses on everyday practice, here in relation to increasing comfort.

It was in the stories of careful use of resources, including heating, food, transport, household items, that the role of informal networks came to the fore. Mostly this help was reciprocal, drawing on communities of support, and included but was not limited to energy-intensive tasks such as cooking and doing laundry:

> *Me and my best friend, we used to have Sunday dinner together nearly every week because it was easier to cook for a family at one house than it was for two. And, as I say, just helping out with general things. If things went down in the house, we would always help each other. If the washing machine broke, the other one would do it for us. If people worked shifts, you'd help with the children, collecting and taking to school. It's just how it's done.* (Celine, householder)

As Celine highlights here, energy use and saving did not only occur in times of or in response to hardship or need. While there were crisis points, such as a broken washing machine, her assertion that many of the other everyday practices were "*just how it's done*" illustrates the form of environmentalism described by Bell (2020) through thrift-like actions according to Hulme's (2019) reassessment of the term. An awareness of energy use and energy saving was at times related to affordability and the ability to manage or cope. However, as the interviewees' accounts detailed, this was not exclusively the case. This raises an important consideration for the targeting and framing of messaging around energy saving and wider environmentalism, in energy advice and support interactions, and more broadly, in policy. For households experiencing forms of energy vulnerability, they are not solely engaging in energy saving or thrifty energy-related behaviours as a response to crisis or financial hardship, it also forms part of everyday household practices.

When energy use is non-negotiable

Energy use at times presented dilemmas for the interviewees. In communicating energy saving and wider reflections of energy use, several set out what they felt to be non-negotiable uses of energy, with reference to certain energy services or the comforts they afforded. These were communicated as red lines, representing the most important uses of energy in order to maintain, as set out in the previous section, 'spaces of energy wellbeing' (Waitt & Harada, 2019).

One aspect related to this was the importance of cleanliness and domesticity, which, in the context of energy and fuel poverty, has received considerable research attention (see for example, Shove, 2003; Liddell & Morris, 2010; Brunner, Spitzer & Christanell, 2012; Butler & Sherriff, 2017; Godin, Laakso & Sahakian, 2020). Day *et al.* (2016), for example, utilise capability theory to emphasise the importance of energy services

associated with cleanliness, for instance hot water and use of a washing machine, referring to these as 'secondary capabilities' that are linked to 'basic capabilities' such as good health and social respect. This was demonstrated by one interviewee, Luke, for whom the heat or eat dilemma was not perceived to be a troubling aspect of his daily decision-making around priority energy use. Instead, for him, non-negotiable energy use centred around keeping clean, while heating and eating were described as considerably less important:

> *Well, it's just, it's bad because I like to keep clean, like I said, so like I said I have gone days without heating and as long as I can keep clean, I am not bothered about eating food or hot drinks or hot meals. I'm not bothered about things like that. As long as I can keep clean, it is a major priority is that. Because I have always been clean. Other than that? It's just for that basically.* (Luke, householder)

Non-negotiable energy uses were also rationalised against various ways in which energy behaviours were more conservative. For Jess, and her husband, as she explained, the non-negotiable was heating:

> *The battle between using what you need and to not be using too much, and the impact of that. and that with gas and electricity. Do you know what, we've been skint, and we're not exactly flush at the moment, but it sounds really awful, but that's one thing that I really will not compromise on, being cold. I cannot, my partner wouldn't either. Gas and electricity is just one of these things that I just haven't got a hold on. But then equally I am sort of conscious of sort of thinking, for example, I don't use my tumble dryer unless I need to. So we've got the conservatory and I hang all my stuff out there or you know I get it out on the line, or put in on the radiators, obviously with the windows open so it doesn't*

get damp, but, so you know I've put my tumble dryer on today and it's because
I need to get the bedding back on and it's not nice here today and it's not going
to dry in the house, so then we'll use it. But I'm not like some people I know who
will have the tumble dryer on all day. But if it's cold I will put the heating on. Still,
even if I put a jumper on, I will still put the heating on. (Jess, householder)

Here, Jess frames energy use as a 'battle' between sufficiency and profligacy. In describing her views on energy use and saving, her narrative enters a negotiation: she is fixed, concrete, immutable on heating use, a position she explains is also held by her husband, but this is supplemented with a description of where energy can be and is routinely saved, centred specifically around laundry practices. This nods to the importance of what Goldsmith (2004) terms the situational nature of advice, while bringing context to the fore (Simcock *et al.*, 2014), and specifically here, offers some indication as to which areas of energy saving discourse might be considered more valuable (and perhaps more well-received and likely to be acted upon) to Jess than others.

The comparison to others – "*I'm not like some people I know*" – bears importance for reflecting how energy problems and related advice and support are framed. As with conceptualisations of thrift, a moralistic discourse is drawn out here in terms of the 'right' or 'wrong' uses of energy. Social psychological theory, around concepts such as social influence, and energy saving behaviour have been the focus of much research in this domain (Nolan *et al.*, 2008; Schultz *et al.*, 2008; Abrahamse & Steg, 2013). However, as Jess indicates here, there are some instances where social influence may be more powerful than others (i.e., in her awareness of laundry practices versus heating use), supporting calls for research and policy to "adopt an

integrated approach in understanding the complex interactions between contextual factors, psychological factors and energy saving behaviour" (Boomsma *et al.*, 2019).

Everyday Mayor Handleys

Opening this section of the chapter was a quote from Mayor Handley, a central character from the wartime BBC radio programme *It's That Man Again*, authoritatively instructing another character, Mrs Mopp, the 'charlady', on ways to use less energy, not as a means of saving money, but to be sparing with resource for the good of the nation set against the backdrop of wartime efforts. Though not in wartime, some of the interviewees similarly shared experiences of Mayor Handley style interactions around energy use and saving – sometimes as the ones doing the telling, adopting the role of Mayor Handley, and at other times being told, like Mrs Mopp. All of these examples occurred outside formalised spaces of energy advice and support, and all related to interactions with informal others, namely relatives and colleagues. Family, friends, neighbours and colleagues, in giving positive and negative reinforcement, were instrumental in shaping views around energy use and energy use itself.

For Holly, a 38-year-old mother of two, her awareness of energy use and saving, in this case not being 'care-fuel', was shaped by comments from her Mum:

> **Holly (householder):** *I am a bit of a devil for having the dishwasher on a lot and I can have it on two or three times, but recently I have said to myself for some reason, a silly thing, I always have a clean cup when I have a cup of tea, never rinse the old one out and just make another cup in there, I'll just get a new one. My Mum points this out as stupid, actually how pathetic this was. But you know, when you're not actually washing up, I think you're not kind of*

scrupulous, not very, you don't have so much care about how much you're using. Because you are not physically washing it up, so.

Danielle (interviewer): *I'd not really thought about the dishwasher's impact. Did you say that was triggered by your Mum partly, conversations with your Mum?*

Holly: *Yeah, yeah, probably because my Mum is quite frugal, and she thinks I am quite wasteful with things. I'm not with everything, but she's sort of said to me, 'oh why are you doing this?', you know, and that is one thing she always says to me, 'you have always got that dishwasher on'. And, actually, recently I have, because a lot of time, because of the children…I feel like the washing machine is on quite a lot, but I haven't always got a full load. Sometimes, I've got this mentality of 'oh, I just want, you know, see the basket [empty]' but have only got a half load but chuck it in anyway, and it's all the time involved in that anyway, it's that as well. I end up loading up the washing machine, unloading the washing machine all the time. I've started thinking more about the time on that.*

This again highlights the embodied nature of energy use and the ways in which it is lived and felt, as discussed earlier in relation to health. Holly explains that where physical energy – the act of washing up – is not required, as when using a dishwasher, an awareness of energy use becomes almost invisible. Holly's Mum calls attention to energy use in this way, making it visible, with reference to it as "*stupid*" and "*pathetic*", contrasting the Handley-esque position of frugality with her own Mopp-esque position of being "*wasteful*" and needing to be told. She goes on to recount how she has become more aware of her energy use and saving as a result, not only in relation to dishwasher use, as her Mum pointed out, but also with other things such as the

washing machine. There is a domino effect here and this has importance for understanding how approaches to communicating small, meaningful changes may lead to other, manifold aspects of energy saving.

Michael, on the other hand, was doing the telling. He expressed a sense of stoicism, noted elsewhere in research exploring energy use, wellbeing and vulnerability (see for example, Waitt & Harada, 2019), around ventilation and limiting the use of space heating, this time at his place of work:

> *…apparently as a child I was the one that had the least covers. I've never liked the heat; I don't like it at all. When I'm at work I sleep with the bedroom window open as well, and everyone complains that its' cold but that's how it like, it's how I like to sleep.* (Michael, householder)

As well as taking an authoritative position in relation to energy, here Michael adds further evidence to the discussion above regarding how energy use is framed around non-negotiable positions.

Like Holly, Jess' experience of authoritative attitudes and influences around energy use was generational in nature. For Jess, however, it was the generation following not the generation before that played a key role. Framing energy use around social influence, Jess described the fervour with which her children approached not only energy saving but wider pro-environmental behaviours, again drawing on moralistic discourse in relation to energy use:

> *Actually, my kids tell me a lot because one of them has an environmental officer at school. so, they're always like 'oh don't run the tap Mum when you're doing this' or 'don't do that' or they're just, like I'll have a shower instead of a bath…. They get brainwashed at school about all these things that you should and*

shouldn't do, they, yeah, like recycling. I recycle at home but because I have to otherwise the bins won't get taken away. But yeah, they [the kids] are really enthusiastic about this stuff. It's a different generation isn't it? (Jess, householder)

What these examples illustrate is that everyday energy use and practices are shaped by the attitudes and assertions of others, usually members of a person's immediate interpersonal network, such as relatives and colleagues. While Chapter Six will examine social relations in the context of energy problems and advice and support in greater detail, what this highlights, with just a few short examples, is the diversity in actors and roles of those doing the telling and being told with regards to energy use and energy saving.

The problem for energy advice and support

While most of this section has focused on energy use in terms of efforts to use *less* energy, situated within a frame of environmental awareness, the energy advisors expressed that at times attitudes around energy saving created significant challenges. This was most notably discussed in relation to where their primary aim of making domestic life (typically) warmer, healthier, more comfortable and less stressful – in other words efforts to tackle fuel poverty - pointed to a need for greater energy use, not less, mostly in relation to improving health, wellbeing, and comfort. As Arthur outlined:

…it's not always about getting people to use less energy, so like with that guy it is not just about switching. He spends the same amount of money, but he has that like extra amount of energy that he can use…I was trying to tell him, 'don't

worry about it, just have the heating on, it's not gonna be that much' (Arthur, advisor)

This highlights the extent to which worry and stress around energy use and cost can impact certain households and endure beyond initial energy advice and support. The switching, as in the example shared by Arthur, was merely a procedural part of the support given. Within this, there was the requirement for a personal and emotional dimension that takes care, reassurance, and often repeated interactions in order for the householder to act or make a change and benefit.

While low(er) energy use might reflect the energy efficiency of the home, the manageability of energy bills, or pro-environmental householder attitudes and behaviours, it can also, as Bella highlighted, mask severe forms of energy vulnerability. Bella explained how, in her role as energy advisor, she had once supported a client to apply for an emergency fuel voucher for their PPM as a result of problems with a Universal Credit claim. Querying strikingly low energy expenditure (i.e., how much he topped up his PPM), she discovered that the low energy use was due to not having most households items that would be deemed essential, such as a fridge and a cooker:

So, like he didn't have a cooker. And like the essential items that you think that must be taxing on your everyday - to not have a cooker and to just use a microwave. And…that's an issue, that's quite a big issue. Especially because there is no community care grant anymore and it hasn't been for a long time, people just get their own social housing place and then there's nothing there - there's not even carpet - and they have to get everything together. So that is a really big problem. Especially single blokes and they don't have any cooker, no washing machine and they come in and you say what do you need? And they

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just say all the things. And then I think well I can't sort all these things so what's the most important to you? (Bella, energy advisor)

While Bella described this as a severe example, it was not uncommon in her professional experience. Arthur shared a similar story:

I did have an elderly gentleman and he did tell me that he wasn't heating his home - I felt that was just a bit worrying and also, he's doing stuff like washing his clothes in his bathtub cos he doesn't have a washing machine. Some people can really slip through the net. (Arthur, energy advisor)

One thing that is touched upon here and throughout this section is how the focus in much communication regarding energy use and energy problems centres on essential household items (i.e., white goods) and the energy services they provide. In this way, energy narratives of related problems, vulnerabilities and advice and support are framed around the machines and appliances used in everyday life, not the power in the wires or the pipes. As such, applications to various trust funds for support to access 'white goods' were a key part of the energy advisors work: "*…the other main big thing that we deal with is replacing white goods - so cookers washing machines boilers - so just applied to charity to get people those items*" (Henri, advisor). Engaging meaningfully with householders about energy problems and forms of energy vulnerability, then, must consider the various ways in which energy is 'lived', here pointing to appliances that form "essential constituents of lives lived well" (Groves *et al.*, 2017, p.74). Discussions that related to the presence, absence or functionality of 'white goods' in the home, whether via formal or informal advice and support, may act as a marker for fuel poverty risk – exposing forms of energy vulnerability that are framed in a way which is rooted in everyday experience of the home (i.e., practices and routines) not metrics of temperature, billing or kilowatt use.

Another challenge that energy advisors described was that against the backdrop of often extremely difficult circumstances, giving advice on energy efficiency and energy saving was understandably not viewed as a priority. As Phoebe, one of the energy advisors, explained, this form of support was typically regarded as '*soft*' energy advice:

> *…with every single client we do give soft energy advice. So, we call them soft measures so we will say like, 'what is the heating set at?', and we will look at the type of meter that they've got, and do they need an economy 7 meter and what type of heating system do they have, and do they know how to use it properly? And then go through general energy efficiency soft measures such as like, 'when you're boiling the kettle do you put as much water as you need in there?', and just general simple things like that really. And looking at the temperature they've got the boiler set out. And then we can give out the energy monitors and the draft excluders and, the radiator reflective heating pads, or whatever they're called. And then as part of that we would also do switching tariffs, changing and stuff like that. So, it's prevention as well as cure in the problems, to be honest. We do just get clients for energy efficiency advice on switching but not as many as we do with the debt.* (Phoebe, advisor)

As Phoebe highlights, there are preventative, as well as reactive, elements to their work on alleviating energy vulnerability but this way of working with clients was not as common as responding to problems, often financial. Claims were not made by the energy advisors as to what forms of energy-related advice and support should be provided or need to be provided more. Instead, and speaking to the overarching argument in this chapter, energy-related advice and support must be flexible, responsive and, critically, in the words of Darby (1999), client-led. This involves time and care to examine lived experience, better understanding the ways in which people

limit and prioritise energy use, the ways in which they frame related problems, and the actors that shape these experiences.

5.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter has explored the ways in which the interviewees – energy advisors and householders (i.e., those with direct experience) – understand and frame their experiences of energy and the need for advice and support (or a lack thereof). Drawing on the concepts of 'presenting problems' – a term used in policy and practice to refer to that which is foregrounded – and 'tellability' – a concept from narrative research that acknowledges certain stories being told over others - the analysis identified three ways in which energy problems were framed. As discussed at length, this covered paying for energy, the impact of energy problems on health and wellbeing, and energy use and saving. Brought together, the discussion of these tellable energy problems aims to give prominence to a bottom-up perspective as to how people experience energy problems. Further, in focusing on the telling of the mundane, the chapter has been able to understand the manifold ways in which energy features as part of daily life, in times of normality and struggle.

Throughout, this chapter has aimed to consider what such insights tell us about how lived experience in this context is shaped or mediated by existing policy and practice – in terms of strengths and successes as well as opportunities to improve or change. With regards to paying for energy, and specifically regarding debt collection, significant issues with establishing the ability to pay and affordability were discussed, as well as it being a process largely characterised by wasted opportunities and relying on repeated engagement from householders where issues were not being resolved at the first point of contact. The consumer-supplier relationship here has importance that as

yet is not well understood, particularly in the context of decision-making with regards to payment method.

In framing energy and health together, a number of considerations with regards to approaching and assessing the effectiveness of advice and support were noted. These related to a preference for a health-framing over a financial-framing of problems, the energy intensiveness of managing health conditions, the implications energy-related stress on energy levels, and other ways in which the positive impacts of alleviating energy vulnerability might be understood (i.e., creativity). Finally, the frame of energy use and saving has been explored, drawing out non-negotiable energy uses, the way in which others' attitudes and perceptions shaped this, and the implications for effectively providing energy advice and support.

Turning to a different element of understanding the effectiveness of energy advice and support, the following chapter will now examine an underexplored area in the context of energy (Hargreaves & Middlemiss, 2020): the role of others, considering key social relations and identities.

Chapter Six: The Role of Others and Key Identities

6.1 Introduction

Asked about energy problems and other related challenges, the interviewees' stories involved an extensive list of actors assuming a variety of complex and interchangeable roles. Across twenty-four interviews, the role of others was fulfilled by, among others, friends, siblings, parents, social workers, healthcare professionals (specialist nurses, doctors), crisis support workers, advisors (generalist and specialist energy, debt, immigration and housing advisors), colleagues, supplier contact centre staff, door-to-door salespeople, engineers, installers, electricians, plumbers, job centre staff, teachers, neighbours, and partners. The quality, type and regularity of contact with these different actors varied greatly. Most of the relations discussed by the interviewees were rooted in actual interactions with others, but not all. Some told of imagined relationships or points of contact, whether longed for or avoided, with, for instance, lost friends and relatives (in terms of bereavement and relationship breakdowns), social workers, or landlords.

Exploring the interviewees' accounts of social relations in the context of energy vulnerability and energy advice and support, the analysis drew on the use of typologies in narrative enquiry (Riley & Hawe, 2009; McGuire, 2007). While this research presents a novel typology of social relations in the context of energy advice and vulnerability, it is worth briefly noting key aspects from the literature that informed this analytical process. Riley and Hawe (2009), for example, outline that the development of a typology involves "the process of drawing on people's descriptions of social life to create social scientific description or explanation" (p.5). A typology can be thought of as an explanatory model related to a particular phenomenon under study - here being

the experiences of energy problems and related advice and support. As Riley and Hawe (2009) assert, this analytical tool – the construction of a typology - allows researchers to identify patterns and gaps, referred to as "dynamics and dimensions that might be missing" (p.4). In terms of the 'plausibility' of a typology, it should represent a model of "typical action…in typical contexts by typical people" (Riley & Hawes, 2009, p.5), again relating to the notion of theoretical generalisation and the 'shared typical' of lived experience discussed in Chapter Four. As used by Riley and Hawes (2009), Weber's 'ideal type' provided a useful analytical lens to approach the data within the development of the typology, where its construction is said not:

> *"…to represent customary expectations or to test micro-predictions in the immediate sense. Rather, its logic involves the surfacing of fixed relationships among phenomena of interest that allow the analyst to see a meta-theme that might not otherwise be observed"* (Weber),

Relatedly then, it is in this chapter that one of the key contributions of the research is set out in the form of a typology that encompasses four ways in which various key roles can be characterised: as experts, allies, antagonists, and peers (see Table 6.1 below). The novel typology presented in this research will be discussed in turn through this chapter. Additionally, as will be discussed in the latter part of the chapter, analytical focus was directed towards the self with a consideration of the role of valued identities.

Theme Two: The role of others (and the self)		
Needing help	Roles and relations	1. Experts
		2. Allies
		3. Peers
		4. Antagonists
		4. The self and valued identities

Table 6.1: Theme Two - people

6.2 Part I: Social Relations

The characterisation of the different roles illustrates how relationships and interactions with others shape the experiences of energy vulnerability. More specifically, in relation to energy advice and support, it provides insights into how effective support is characterised, for instance, what does and does not help, and in what ways. As noted earlier, Goldsmith (1999) has highlighted that in advice and support often multiple roles are at play:

> "…advice givers and recipients might assume the roles of commiserators who have had similar experiences, joint problem solvers who work together to figure out a solution, a consultant who advises the other what to do, or a critic who shows the other how to mend his or her ways" (Goldsmith, 1999, p.309)

At an individual or household level, this considers how social relations play a role in what Middlemiss and Gillard (2015) term a household's 'adaptive capacity' – their ability to withstand, integrate or cope with energy-related problems – with some roles enhancing a household's capacity, and others reducing it. Beyond the individual and in terms of policy and practice, understanding these roles has value in considering the factors that shape or hinder the effectiveness of energy advice and support, including access, trust, awareness, resistance – aspects related to understanding effectiveness which will be the focus in the final findings chapter, Chapter Seven.

Before introducing each role in greater detail, the table below (Table 6.2) provides an overview of the way in which the relations with others have been characterised from the interviewees' accounts. While certain actors (i.e., energy suppliers, private landlords) more often fulfilled expected or stereotypical role types (i.e., antagonist), this was not uniformly the case: the energy supplier or private landlord was not

always the 'bad guy', and the relative or neighbour was not always a positive source of support. Specific actors, such as relatives, could also assume different roles at different times – highlighting a fluidity to the typology. Most accounts of energy-related problems involved more than one of the roles set out below, with examples demonstrating how at times they worked together or towards the same goal, while at other times, conflicts between roles frustrated or further complicated the situation.

Role	Overview of role	Position	Example actors
Expert	Authoritative, source of specialist advice/support on rights and responsibilities. Less likely to provide emotional support. Detached and slower to be able to help (more in-depth support), but particularly valuable in the most complex cases.	Part of the solution	Specialist advice teams, advisors, engineers, firefighters, social workers, legal representatives, GPs
Ally	Cooperates and/or helps but is not in the same or similar position. Tries to bring about changes in a way that improves, typically by adding to or removing certain aspects of a householder's circumstances. Aware of emotional toll and provides emotional alongside practical support. Support does not come at a personal or financial cost. Often trained and employed.	Part of the solution	Frontline workers (i.e., advisors, housing officers), friends, relatives, landlords, healthcare professionals
Peer	Informal source of advice and support. Usually from a household's interpersonal network. Can act like an ally but has lived through/is living with a similar sort of experience. Often encourages or dissuades a particular solution, provides emotional support, shapes social norms, gives immediate practical and financial help (crisis response). Support often comes at a personal or financial cost.	Can be both part of the solution and part of the problem	Friends, relatives, neighbours
Antagonist	Causes and sustains aspects of energy vulnerability. Provides inaccurate or ineffective information, advice and support. Often frustrates, complicates or blocks the efforts of others. Disregard for risk, vulnerability, emotional toll.	Part of the problem	Energy suppliers, contact centre staff, landlords, frontline workers (i.e., job centre staff)

Table 6.2: Overview of four key roles: experts, allies, peers and antagonists.

The following sections will now introduce each of the four roles in more detail using illustrative quotes from the interview excerpts.

6.2.1 Experts

While frontline workers, such as energy advisors and housing support officers, are typically considered to have significant expertise in key areas, the interviewees referred to an even higher level of specialist knowledge and skills among certain actors, categorised here as *experts*. Expectedly, then, experts are mostly seen as part of the solution to a given problem, energy-related or otherwise, and are individuals with significant professional expertise, not always energy-specific but, if not, of relevance in different ways to dealing with energy problems. Such actors are typically employed (not volunteers or informal relations), highly trained and highly skilled sources of specialist knowledge, and consequently contacted in relation to some of the most challenging or extreme cases of energy-related and other problems. Often, between the householder experiencing a problem, such as a disputed energy debt, and the 'expert', narratives revealed a middle-person whose role it is to action or convey the more specialist information – the messenger – where they may, for example, use regulatory guidance to challenge an energy supplier.

A clear example of this was found in references to the Citizens Advice 'extra help unit', a team of specialist energy advisors contactable only by those working in the frontline energy advice services for additional, more specific and advanced support:

> *So, yeah, it's getting information from the people who work at the charities, or the energy companies and sharing it with members of team…[and] the extra help unit are amazing. They are just like expert energy advisors so when you get stuck on something you can ring them.* (Henri, advisor)

…we're not about knowing all of the answers to everything, it's the skill of being able to find those answers when you when you don't know. So yeah, you research, we've got resources, have Advisernet, we have all of the books, [and] we have expert advice teams if we need to go that far. (Andrew, advisor)

Experts were not always energy experts per se, with medical professionals, installers, legal representatives and those working in the fire service, for instance, also discussed in terms of shaping energy use, costs, and experiences of vulnerability:

… [the nurses] do home visits and that means when they go to people's homes, they're able to see it it's, to feel if it's cold because people might not tell them, but they are able to go in and prompt that referral. And that means that they've been to the place and done the risk assessments which means that I can go out knowing that it's a safe environment, as far as it can be a safe environment. (Annabelle, advisor)

And there's elements of safety as well, yeah, yeah. A friend who is in the fire service is, well, conscious of things that, so I do at night, religiously, everything is switched off. (Dora, householder)

Contact with experts was much less frequent than with other sources of support. However, despite interactions being less regular, briefer, and at times serendipitous, they were positioned as significant and impactful. Sharing the story of having a new central heating system installed many years earlier, for instance, Joyce still praised the installer for going above and beyond, not only providing careful expert guidance on use of the new system, but also imparting wider knowledge on energy use and costs:

… [and] he set the thermostat in the hall, he showed me that and he said he'd keep it on, I think it was, I don't know if it was 16 or 18, I've got it on 16, and I think it was 18 but I turned it down because it was too hot. And he said to try and leave that alone. He also showed me how to alter the temperature of the water in my boiler, whether you need it hotter in the winter and cooler in the summer. So, he showed me how to do that. He showed me how to reset the meter if I have an issue with it. And he also told me the thing about the shower and the bath which I wouldn't have even thought for two minutes, I knew bath takes more water, but I didn't think it was going to be about ten times more cost. Really helpful. (Joyce, householder)

Another key characteristic of the role of expert was a sense of detachment from the person and the problem, though not necessarily in a bad way. This was communicated in terms of physical distance, with such individuals often being accessible only through another person or service (an intermediary), and also distance or detachment in an emotional sense with experts impartially providing factual concrete information, often related to rights, regulations or responsibilities. Introduced here, the relationship between the householder and the expert, while often indirect, has implications for various aspects of the effectiveness of energy advice and support. For the interviewees, this was mostly noted regarding navigating some of the most complex energy-related problems and in building (and sustaining) householder trust by remedying issues without errors or undue delays and as effectively as possible. This role, as noted however, typically hinged on another: most commonly that of an ally.

6.2.2 Allies

The role of *ally*, which featured prominently in the interviews, involved key actors that were unlikely to be going through or have experience of something similar, but were

in some way supporting a householder with an energy-related problem (e.g., energy debts), often alongside other issues (e.g., rent arrears, benefit issues). Allies could act as the first, middle and last point of contact. In some cases, as the first point of contact, they would signpost on to other forms of advice and support. At other times, the ally's role was more like that of an intermediary, acting as a middleperson, for example between a householder and their energy supplier. At times the ally was described as the final point of contact, whereby they provided the required advice or support to solve or alleviate the impacts of the problem, but this often occurred after multiple points of (usually frustrated) contact with others.

Allies were characterised as non-judgemental, there to cooperate or help, with a fixed aim of being part of the solution. Actions taken were with the goal of bringing about changes that improve a householder's circumstances, through practical and emotional support, and usually involved regular interactions discussing the problem(s):

> *…just to speak to her, and for someone to listen and not judge me, and to basically say they would try and get me help.* (Luke, householder)

Frontline energy advisors – those working directly with householders, unlike the more specialist teams discussed above – were the dominant example of this role, and therefore unsurprising given the research design to have featured so heavily. However, other actors were characterised in a similar way, including, for instance, housing support officers and healthcare professionals. The role was not always fulfilled by professionals (i.e., those employed to provide support), with friends and family members also referred to in this regard: "[it is] *either my Dad or Money Saving Expert*" (Martha, householder).

Like experts, allies were unequivocally seen as part of the solution, but distinguishing them was a closeness to the person and the problem. This was physically, often via repeated face-to-face interactions, and in the sense of being cognizant of the emotional toll, or as being "*emotionally involved*", in dealing or living with energy problems:

> *… [energy advisors] are speaking from a position of knowledge and authority, so, as I say, they are not directly emotionally involved. I mean, they are emotionally involved in terms of care*. (Charles, householder)

Often, the role of allies was most prominent at crisis points when dealing with an energy problem. This meant that allies were perceived as largely acting in a reactive, rather than preventative, capacity, though not always, and with a substantial part of their role being to fix the mistakes or oversights of others:

> *That's when the* [energy advice service] *got involved and said this is an intolerable position. We need to help this man, we need to do something here, because he has suffered with a serious health condition being made worse by his circum... you know, (A) he is not getting enough benefits, (B) he is paying through his nose for gas and electricity and you see, none of the agencies involved seem to be bothering to sort this out. So, they sorted it out*. (Theo, householder)

Householder relations with experts and allies, unsurprisingly, were almost exclusively positive. Both roles were referred to as key players in alleviating the negative experiences of energy vulnerability through energy advice and related forms of support. Several of the householders highlighted that a key aspect of this positive relationship hinged on the ally's approach to advice and support provision. Namely,

that this entailed working collaboratively with a householder, not automatically and solely on their behalf:

> *She worked out a plan of action, whereby we sort of worked as a team. And she said, 'well I'll get on the case with this, and I'll phone these people and I'll contact them, and in the meantime, you can do this, this and this'. So, as I say, we worked as a team and we got things done between us.* (Charles, householder)

Adopting such an approach, as 'joint problem-solvers' (Goldsmith (1999), reduces the power imbalance between those who possess and those who require energy-related knowledge or skills, with both working together to achieve a particular outcome. The interviewees were distinctly aware of this, and for Charles, in particular, this provided a sense of equal standing and a way of working that boosted his confidence in independently dealing with future issues (i.e., an incorrect energy bill). In policy terms, this way of working achieves one of the principle aims of a frontline advice service, in empowering individuals, where able: "…*that's the CAB buzzword, [to] 'empower' the clients to write letters and do things*" (Arthur, advisor).

6.2.3 Peers

Central to this thesis is a recognition that energy research and policy to date have largely overlooked the role of informal others, such as relatives, friends, and neighbours, and how these relations shape our experiences of domestic energy (Hargreaves & Middlemiss, 2020). Focusing specifically on the experiences of energy vulnerability and energy advice and support it is here that this research, in part, makes a contribution, adding to a growing evidence base examining interpersonal networks in the context of energy (e.g., Hargreaves & Middlemiss, 2020; Middlemiss *et al.*, 2019;

Middlemiss & Gillard, 2017). Referred to here as *peers*, the role of informal others was referred to extensively within the interviews. This was in both negative and positive ways, though mostly in terms of the latter.

What distinguished peers from experts and allies is that advice and support stemmed from direct experience of a similar or the same energy-related problem: in this way, peers embodied the role of 'expert by experience' (McLaughlin, 2009). In Goldsmith's (1999) terms, they were 'commiserators' with 'similar experiences" (p.309). As such, actors in this role offered not only practical, financial and emotional support, but also instilled a sense of solidarity. Interviewees talked about not feeling alone as a result of access to peers and peer support, and likewise, links were drawn between an absence of peer support and feelings of isolation, a widely documented broader issue associated with cold homes and fuel poverty (Marmot, 2011). As George noted:

> *My neighbour at the rear of the house, a lady, is very helpful and we kind of look out for each other. So, I know I've got someone nearby.* (George, householder)

Peers were more readily, easily and immediately accessible compared to other sources of advice and support. This often made them the preferred first point of contact, "…*Mum, sister…my first port of call will always be family, and then you contact the suppliers*" (Celine, householder). Though, on some occasions, this might be as an initial step – specifically talking through a problem – before seeking formalised sources of support: "*I'll have a good winge and moan to Mum about stuff, but she never usually gives me any help or advice, she's just really a sounding board, you know*" (Patricia, householder). Peers, particularly parents, have been identified as playing a valuable role before (in talking through the problem) and after (in confirming the validity and reliability of details and information) instances of formalised energy advice and support

(Butler, 2016). This suggests peers provide a form of wraparound or underlying support that strengthens and compliments other provision but has perhaps been less visible or acknowledged in policy and research to date.

Key practical examples of peer support, typically given alongside moments of advice in terms of alleviating the experiences of energy vulnerability, involved sharing space, food and use of appliances to support others in times of energy-related hardship.

> *On some occasions [when cold], I would actually have to go and visit a neighbour if they were there and sort of hang around with them.* (Charles, householder).

> *If the washing machine broke, the other one [friend] would do it for us.* (Celine, householder)

> *…the amount of money I had didn't cover three quarters of my direct debits, so I was relying on family and friends to not only help with things like gas and electric, but food as well. If they hadn't been, if people hadn't been dropping me a bag of food off there was nothing left. The money went in, the amount that went in, it didn't cover everything and that was the basics.* (Patricia, householder)

Another distinguishing feature of peer support was the provision of direct and often immediate financial relief: peers would often 'loan' money (though commonly without expectation of repayment) to cover bills, top up prepayment meters, and buy food, among other essential needs, as Patricia explained:

> *…he [partner] would make sure that…I've got [money for] heating and electric, if I was short, he would make sure of it…And other people have helped, if I've been running a bit low at the end of the month, other people, family members*

> *have helped and give me some money to put on the gas and the electric.*
>
> (Patricia, householder)

Given the element of shared experience including the experience of low and strained income, this form of assistance was often to the financial detriment of the peer providing support; they too were typically experiencing financial hardship to some extent. For Elizabeth, a key example of this, an instance of her Mum loaning her money was perceived to be '*lucky*' (and unusual):

> *My Mum lent me some money; she was lucky that she'd had a payoff from an accident that she'd had at work. So, she had money in her bank that she could lend me to be able to pay bills and buy food and stuff, but it wasn't a lot.*
>
> (Elizabeth, householder)

As well as instances of informal borrowing and lending, as highlighted in other research examining the lived experiences of social policy and poverty (Patrick, 2014), there were many other ways in which peers helped. In addition to giving money, assistance with doing laundry and cooking meals (and other energy-intensive practices) were additional forms of support noted by the interviewees. This again was positioned as that which was provided as a personal choice and one that came at a cost to the person providing help, therefore not given as a professional requirement. In this way, peers were typically commended as exceptional sources of support over others: they had no duty to help, often very limited resources themselves, yet had done so any way. This draws again on the sense of solidarity felt with peers providing advice and support through experiences of energy vulnerability.

The type of advice and support typically given was qualitatively different, too: energy-related advice and support from peers was bidirectional, it was shared, not given, and

this typically evoked a sense of more equal power dynamics. Where this was not the case, a difference in hierarchy was reflected more so in the level of experience, not level of knowledge, as Jess highlighted with regards to parental experience and the age of the children:

> *Yeah, I've got friends who I phone for advice on the children and equally I've got friends that would ask [me], I've got some friends who I would always ask their advice and they would never ask me because they've generally got older children. And then I've got friends who've got younger children who tend to ask me stuff.* (Jess, householder)

Peers were not always described as part of the solution, however, and were at times even positioned as part of the problem (albeit in a much lesser way than antagonists). A key example of this relates to feelings of stigma and shame around energy use and associated problems, an area, which, as noted, has received considerable focus in research (Hards, 2013; Reid, McKee, & Crawford, 2015). The impact of stigma and shame worked in two ways. Firstly, when seeking advice, some communicated this as pejorative judgements of peers, "*My Mum points this out as stupid, actually how pathetic this was*" (Martha, householder), and this was seen to impact disclosures of energy-related suffering: "*I wouldn't say that people are freezing, but it does really strike me that maybe they are, but don't want to say*" (Arthur, advisor). This was similarly the case even with unknown peers in online forums:

> *"You find a lot of the time, if anyone ever puts things on about money, someone can be, look people are very judgemental about what people might have spent their money on"* (Holly, householder).

Secondly, the normalisation of energy-related problems among peers - "*we were all in the same position*" (Celine, householder) – played a key role. In a positive light, it could strip away a sense of stigma or shame, thus making a need for advice and support seem more acceptable: "…*lots of people, like me, just don't understand exactly how it [energy billing] works*" (Martha, householder). However, in a less positive way, this normalisation could be linked to the characterisation of certain households as 'silent sufferers' (Sheen, 2013), enduring longer-term and perhaps unnecessary mechanisms of coping in part as a consequence of refrainment from seeking or accepting help.

Focusing more specifically on the communication of energy advice and information between peers, this role was key to building a sense of trust or distrust in taking action or accepting help from others. The power of 'word of mouth' highlights the importance of this role: "*some people they've heard stories from people about switching when it goes horribly wrong which is quite a big thing*" (Annabelle, advisor). Interviewees outlined that they would or would not switch suppliers, change their method of payment, allow engineers or installers into the property, adjust heating controls or systems, claims benefits, contact advice services, follow guidance of healthcare professionals, among other examples, all linked in some way to communication with informal others, such as friends, relatives and neighbours.

6.2.4 Antagonists

The most prominent type of role discussed in relation to the interviewees' experiences of energy vulnerability was that of negative, hostile, difficult actors, categorised here as *antagonists*. Given that interviewees were asked to share details of energy-related troubles, a more predominant focus on negative relations was, to some extent, expected. Antagonists, unlike the other three roles, were never positioned as trusted

sources of support. They were either the direct cause of an energy-related problem, a contributory factor in the sustainment of that problem, or played an active role in blocking efforts to solve a problem. Key actors in this role included landlords, the job centre, previous tenants, neighbours, the local authority, and, predominantly, energy suppliers.

Linked to notions of responsibility, all were described as points of contact that either could or should have helped but had not done so. Antagonists could be characterised as active or passive: they were either seen to have actively made a situation worse through a particular decision or action, or passively not taken steps to alleviate the energy-problem where they could or should have. Landlords, in particular, were situated in the latter:

> … *the electric heaters are a waste of time. I've spoke to the landlord about it, but he doesn't want to know. As long as he's getting his rent, he's not bothered basically, so that's a big worry at the moment*. (Luke, householder)

As noted, energy suppliers fulfilled this role more than any other actor, mirroring the longstanding sentiment of distrust in the energy sector and with energy billing (Citizens Advice, 2015). A lack of trust manifested from perceived dishonesty and even suggestions of criminality in the behaviour of energy suppliers, specifically in relation to calculating energy costs and billing practices:

> … *[you need to] check that you're paying the right amount for your energy. And that you're not being ripped off*. (Elizabeth, householder)

> …*there's quite a lot who think that the company are misinforming them in some way. This idea of being ripped off. And there have been big increases in energy*

prices in the last few months, so people have been quite surprised and annoyed about that. (Henri, advisor)

Antagonists were at times identified as being a source of energy-related advice and support, but that which had been provided was often regarded as inaccurate or ineffective, with a common trait being the failure to fully take account of a household's circumstances, their vulnerability or capacity. Responses to energy-related (and other) problems were not seen to be enacted in the best interests of the householder, and other competing priorities (usually financially motivated) took precedence. A clear example of this related to energy debts, as discussed in the previous chapter, where affordability – in policy often termed the 'ability to pay' (Ofgem, 2019) – was rarely assessed accurately in dealings with the energy supplier:

> *…the debt recovery rate on a metre. It was set at £10 – he's on state pension that's £10 a week, whereas it should be £3.70 a week which suppliers should ask the circumstances and they don't…and suppliers tend to force people to use prepayment meters as opposed to looking at their ability to pay and under the ability to pay regulations they are supposed to do that as a last resort, but they don't do*! (Phoebe, advisor)

> *And they have targets - energy companies - to get money back.* (Annabelle, advisor)

> *…that meant I was paying over, more than I needed, or could afford, and so I couldn't pay off the debt.* (Charles, householder).

Other actors, such as job centre staff and officers working for the local authority, while not necessarily assisting with energy affordability or energy debts, demonstrated similar oversight for vulnerability in times of financial crisis or ill-health (which, as set

out in Chapter Five, was often discussed with links to energy-related problems). Interviewees recounted turning to such sources when there were problems with income (whether from social security or employment), leaving them unable to afford gas, electricity, food, furniture, clothes, and other essential household items. However, they were frequently met with inaccurate and ineffective responses. Instances where antagonists failed to act or act appropriately included signposting to online resources where a person had stated they could not use a computer, advising to make payments despite knowing the person had exhausted all income, and frequent failings to acknowledge and appropriately respond to disclosures of anxiety and other mental health conditions. For Patricia, this involved ignorance on the part of the supplier to acknowledge that form-filling heightened her anxiety, and could therefore result in her choosing to not pursue advice or support, instead coping indefinitely:

> *Because, like I said, I've got anxiety, and so looking at [the form] I felt sick. I felt, oh really, I've got to do these things after I've explained everything on the phone, and now I have to fill the form out.* (Patricia, householder)

Finally, antagonists not only overlooked vulnerability, affordability, and capacity, but were also described as lacking in sensitivity, providing little or no emotional support. More accurately, antagonists were often cited as a source of emotional distress, leaving people feeling, in terms used by the interviewees, fearful, let down, distraught, unsupported, and, as Celine noted, disgusted:

> …*when I went to the job centre to check what I was entitled to, I remember sitting and not feeling very well and this lady said to me, 'it's a shame really that you hadn't got a couple of kids cos you'd get more money… I was absolutely disgusted.* (Celine, householder)

6.2.5 Summarising the role of others

As Hargreaves and Middlemiss (2020) have argued there is a need for greater attention to the role of social relations in energy policy and research. In focussing here on some of these complex social relations, it is clear that our relations with others shape the causes and solutions to fuel poverty in terms of energy prices, energy inefficient properties and income poverty. The above sections have introduced four ways in which key roles and relations were characterised by the interviewees, setting out a typology of role and relations in the context of energy vulnerability. Experts, allies, peers and antagonists, represented by a wide range of specific actors at different times and in response to different issues, played distinctly different roles in response to the experiences of energy vulnerability and energy advice and support. In experiences of energy-related advice and support, the role of others is of critical importance and efforts to better understand this role provide a clear contribution to the existing evidence base.

Experts and allies, although differing in terms of closeness to the person and the problem, are unwaveringly positioned as part of the solution and their actions and decisions in providing energy advice and support directly benefit those facing key challenges associated with energy vulnerability. Peers, framed as those providing advice and support from a position of shared experience and solidarity, offer wraparound or underlying support that often strengthens, and compliments formalised provision. Another appealing and distinguishing, yet problematic strength of peer support (over that provided by experts and allies) is that it can typically involve the offer of immediate financial support in times of crisis, alongside other forms of support. To what extent this hides the most severe experiences of energy vulnerability from policy initiatives, such as funded advice and support programmes, is unknown. Finally,

antagonists, the fourth role, were actors seen to add an extra (often regarded as unnecessary) layer of complexity in dealing with energy and other related or intwined problems. In the interviewees' narratives of energy vulnerability, they were regarded as unhelpful at best, and hostile at worst. They created additional hurdles and problems, such as setting debt repayment rates too high (i.e., energy suppliers) or refusing to engage with energy efficiency improvements or other repairs in a property they rent out (i.e., private landlords). As this chapter has outlined so far, some relations function in ways that strengthen or compliment the approach to alleviating a particular energy-related problem, while others actively make the problem more difficult to overcome. The way in which relations work to alleviate or perpetuate the experiences of energy vulnerability is an area that has to date received limited attention.

Of course, it is not solely the role of others - their actions, behaviours, and decisions - that shape the experiences of energy vulnerability and energy advice and support. As Hargreaves and Middlemiss (2020) note, the way in which people see themselves has implications for how they are understood, the targeting of policy, and their interactions with others. The second part of this chapter acknowledges this with a turn in focus to the self and key identities.

6.3 Part II: The self? Honouring valued identities

6.3.1 Revisiting identity

Goldsmith's (2004) framework for understanding the social process of advice and enacted support – the Communication Model of Advice (CMoA) - not only calls for in-depth consideration of the role of others, but also for a focus on the self. Outlined in the third tenet of the model, advice and support that speaks to and honours valued identities (as well as relational characteristics) is perceived to be more effective. It is

in this tenet of the model that relational and identity implications are foregrounded in the study of how and why advice and support benefits individuals. The previous sections have focused on the former – the role of others and relational characteristics - but here the analysis will turn towards the latter, considering how the interviewees' described their sense of self in relation to experiences of energy vulnerability and related advice and support. In other words, it will consider the valued identities brought forward in the interviewees' stories of energy problems and efforts to solve them.

Before turning the focus towards the interviews, however, it is worth briefly revisiting the concept of identity and how, informed by the literature review and development of the methodological approach, this has been considered in the analysis. Situated between a category approach and a social constructionist approach, Tracy and Robles (2013) describe a person's identities as created through *actions* and *expressive choices* (i.e., everyday talk). They define this as neither explicitly fixed nor fluid, but shifting between the two:

> "… [identities are] best thought of as stable features of a person that exist prior to any particular situation *and* as dynamic and situated accomplishments, enacted through talk, changing from one occasion to the next…identities are social categories *and* are personal and unique" (p21, emphasis in original).

Scholars examining identities adopt different typologies dependent, as Tracy and Robles (2013) point out, on the purpose of the research. In examining everyday talk, they suggest that 'communicators' have multiple identities, similar to what is termed 'narrative selves' in phenomenological psychology (Langdridge, 2007), which, as well as multiple, can be "…contingent, historically and culturally specific, and will therefore be subject to change" (Langdridge, 2007, p.52). Tracy and Robles (2013) outline that in everyday talk, multiple identities sit across three broad types: *master identities*

(which are relatively stable and unchanging, such as gender, ethnicity and age), *interactional identities* (referring to specific roles assumed in a communicative context, such as a parent or friend), and *personal identities* (what might be thought of as relating to our personality or character, for instance, honest, confident, needy, lazy, but also linked to the relationships we hold, or our *personal and relational identities*). All three are interlinked, but of particular relevance to the analysis here is the third kind - *personal and relational identities* – where the quality of a relationship is drawn out in identity talk (i.e., as hostile, warm, supportive, superior, close, etc.). Bound in this perspective of identity work through everyday talk is the concept of face, discussed at length in Chapter Three. To reiterate, face refers to our image of self and a desire to be, in Tracy and Robles' words (2013), liked, appreciated, or seen as competent. Interactions with others, especially in advice and support exchanges where problems and vulnerabilities are exposed, therefore pose significant threats to face.

In the interviews, advisors and householders drew on multiple roles to position their actions, decisions, views and experiences in relation to energy and other problems. This could be understood in terms of Tracy and Roble's (2013) identity-types (master, interactional and personal and relational) and included references to female, parent, entrepreneur, expert, lazy, environmentalist, benefit claimant, sibling, neighbour, helpful, or deserving, among others. Interviewees talked not only about valued identities (i.e., parent, good neighbour), but also referred to rejected identities (i.e., in relation to illness, employment, vulnerability) and nostalgically about past identities once held with pride but since lost (i.e., entrepreneur, family host, source of support). Key identities and roles often centred on notions of responsibility, frugality, creativity, and capability, and these conceptions have been drawn out here and throughout the findings chapters.

The following sections will discuss a number of ways in which identity work was disclosed in the interviewees' narrative accounts of energy vulnerability and energy advice and support.

6.3.2 Energy-related identities

Given the focal point of the research and the purposive nature of the interviews, the predominant way in which interviewees talked about themselves was in relation to energy. For the householders, as discussed at length in Chapter Five, this involved reflections on energy use and billing, their experiences as an energy consumer and customer. As discussed, the householders talked at length about themselves (and in the judgement of others) as not being wasteful or excessive in terms of their patterns and perspectives of energy use, and energy-related identities were often linked to other key identities or roles and related responsibilities: energy use as a mother, for instance, and doing laundry or preparing meals. Also as noted, householders were keen to communicate their frugality, despite the interviews leaning more towards a focus on asking if they were using enough energy for good health and comfort, not how they could use less. Nevertheless, frequent references were made to an awareness of energy saving and conservation, which were typically constructed in terms of only using energy for the most essential services.

Expectedly, and of focus here, another dominant energy-related identity was that of 'energy expert' or as the 'energy professional'. This, however, did not centre solely on perceptions of self in the moments of giving energy advice and support, but more beyond the advice interaction into the energy advisor's everyday life. Demonstrating a clear example of an interactional identity at play, all six of the advisors interviewed adopted the position that a good energy advisor is a good role model as an energy consumer. This was discussed in relation to managing finance, engagement with the

energy market (i.e., switching) and energy use and saving, as Phoebe, Andrew and Bella noted:

> *I've got to practice what I preach. I can't advise clients to do one thing and then do the other myself. I've got to.* (Phoebe, advisor)

> *…it's like you do not practice what you preach at all. I told my colleagues as well, I am such a rubbish energy advisor, I've not even switched myself and I'm actually on a standard tariff - it's ridiculous!* (Andrew, advisor)

> *[I'm] not very good with money which is maybe weird as an advisor.* (Bella, advisor)

This demonstrates a blurring between professional and personal energy-related identities, showing that a sense of self – and the role of face threat (Gordan and Luke, 2012; Goldsmith, 1999) - plays a critical role: the energy advisors were not asked to disclose whether they have recently switched supplier or is they used energy efficiently, but they demonstrated a cognizance as to how their actions and behaviours at home might contradict the actions and behaviours that they, in their professional roles, suggest others should follow. Particularly important to note is that this can suggest a relatability from the advisors in terms of understanding inaction: if they, as professionally trained energy advisors, do not regularly switch supplier, then why would households? As Phoebe (advisor) stated when defending the inaction of those she had given advice and support to: "*people forget, and people have lives*". It should be noted that, while the scale of income-related struggle was not described as the same for the energy advisors as for their clients, all but one communicated how they and their families struggled with low income. While energy, and other household expenditure, was generally much more affordable, there remained a careful balancing

between income and outgoings. Despite this, there are obvious differences in the motivations to switch in the lives of the energy advisors (market engagement) and the householders (affordability) and, while relatability and understanding are important, these are important considerations here.

As noted in other research (Butler & Sherriff, 2017), it is unusual for individuals with lived experience of a given social issue to adopt academic and policy terminology to describe their own personal circumstances, particularly with reference to poverty, vulnerability, housing status, etc. This is no different in the context of energy vulnerability, with householders rarely identifying as 'fuel poor' or living in 'fuel poverty'. To reflect this, such terms are generally not used in research interactions, such as interviews, as with the present research. However, Charles, a retired householder, was an exception to this:

> **Charles (householder):** *I was living in fuel poverty before, and I didn't know about all of these things.*
>
> **Danielle (interviewer):** *did you know about fuel poverty before?*
>
> **Charles:** *well, I kind of worked it out, just from listening to Radio 4 that it was a situation that was pretty dire and well I thought well that's me really. Because some days it was a tossup between do I put money on the key meter, or can I afford to eat? It was like that, you know. It was pretty bad for a while - for about three or four years.*

For Charles, identifying that he was 'living in fuel poverty' played a key role in his experience of getting help, specifically in shaping conversations he had with health professionals and energy advisors, both considered to adopt the role of ally. In the interview, the term was used with a sense of greater clarity over personal

circumstances, confidence and reassurance. This is similar to that described in research examining the benefits and implications of mental health labels following diagnosis where terminology can be understood as useful in providing a sense of certainty and legitimacy (Chew-Graham *et al.*, 2008). However, this not exclusively the case and researchers note the significance of action that follows being meaningful and effective, over the labelling itself. Relating back to the normalisation of coping with energy-related problems and the role of peers, Charles refers to his experiences as a plight felt by many others and this impacted his experiences of energy advice and support in a positive way resulting in him feeling less vulnerable to energy-related problems at home. It is crucial to note here, however, that this was not a label given to Charles, but instead a term adopted by him as a result of identifying with the description of fuel poverty shared in a radio programme. The difference between being ascribed the label of 'fuel poor' and self-identifying as such, due to learning about the issue, raises important considerations for what language is used, when, and in which spaces. Raising awareness through campaign and educational activity via channels such as television and radio has potential that is arguably not yet well understood. This example, in particular, suggests that radio or television campaigns may provide a valuable mechanism for the initial reaching of the 'hardest to reach' (Ambrose *et al.*, 2019) whether this is rural and remote communities or those with limited social networks or capacity to leave the home, having the potential to reach people in spaces that people ordinarily and routinely occupy.

6.3.3 Gendered identities

Hargreaves and Middlemiss' (2020) typology of how relationships shape energy demand draws a distinction between micro and macro social relations, with the latter referring broadly to membership of a particular social category (Tracy & Robles, 2013)

such as those related to identities around gender or class. Understanding our relationships in terms of these social categories necessarily draws attention to the ways in which we identify ourselves. In the present research, this at times involved expressions of how gender and gendered roles were described by the interviewees as shaping their experiences of energy vulnerability. In the interviews, this was particularly the case for those identifying as mothers (an interactional identity) and describing their role as mothers, and even more so for those who were or had been a lone parent (Elizabeth, Celine, Patricia, and Dora, all householders). For all seven of the interviewees who discussed their roles as mothers, past or present, energy use and feelings of vulnerability were shaped significantly by the responsibilities and expectations of the role, with keeping the home warm, cooking and doing laundry the most common aspects noted. As Dora explained:

> *I think most people understand you're on your own with a young family and you've got to, well your job is to keep them warm, to feed them, so you know that's important, isn't it? And I think any family would realise that, that you know, especially if it was cold, you have got to keep your children warm and fed*. (Dora, householder)

The acknowledgement of motherhood's ties to domestic responsibility, and its links to energy, was also noted by two other female interviewees who were not (yet) mothers. This was in relation to the imminent arrival of a new baby for one interviewee (Bella, advisor) and the hope to have a family in the future for another (Celeste, householder). For Celeste, health issues had meant there were difficulties in becoming pregnant, and her experiences of longing for this role in part triggered the onset of severe anxiety. With this came long-term sick leave from employment and later a withdrawal from day-to-day management of the home and bills resulting in significant fuel debts,

compounded further by other financial issues. Taking time to trace Celeste's account of energy debt and vulnerability back to what she believed to be the initial trigger led to the revelation of an identity she valued highly - that of being a mother. Allies, in this example an energy advisor and a counsellor, were instrumental in providing holistic and more sensitive support, after having invested what Charles referred to as "emotional care" and taking time to understand Celeste's personal story and how this related to inaction with her energy debts.

For Bella, the imminent arrival of a baby, and therefore the imminence in assuming the role of mother, had prompted less emotional and more practical considerations related to identity and energy, with an in-depth assessment of thermal comfort in the home, specifically responses to dealing with draughts:

> *Because the baby is just going to be there and that is the main room. And I'm alright on the couch, there's a bit of a draught from the front door, but I can put a blanket over me. But if the baby is in a little bouncer on the floor*. (Bella, advisor)

Hosting family gatherings and cooking for others was also noted as important aspects of domestic identity among female interviewees, not just as mothers, but as daughters, sisters and friends. Celeste's experience is again relevant here, whereby, in a discussion regarding socialising and energy use, she fondly recounted a time before ill-health and financial hardship, where she would prepare Christmas dinner for the extended family. Links to cultural identity were additionally noted, as well as certain matriarchal expectations of self as the oldest of five sisters with an ageing mother:

> *…because I'm Muslim, I am from a Pakistani family, we don't celebrate Christmas, so I like to do the, since, well because I've been brought up here*

and everything, I like to do a big do…I've done it for years. I used to cook all of the...well, we don't have turkey, nobody likes turkey because it's too dry, they say. But I cook chicken, instead of turkey, and invited everybody to have Christmas dinner at my place. (Celeste, householder)

Gendered stereotypes were also drawn upon by those identifying as male, with masculinity being characterised, explicitly in some cases, by the interviewees in terms of strength, independence, and good health. For Luke, whose benefits had been disrupted and stopped due to complications around time in hospital, not being able to afford electricity had meant he was unable to buy food or cook for himself. An inability to provide for himself, positioned as the most basic level of capability, and the loss of a past identity, a father, partner and businessman who boxed and was in good health, had resulted in a deeply distressing need for help. As Luke illustrates below, this led to extreme shame in disclosing energy-related and other issues. His initial contact in accessing advice and support being with a female, however, was regarded as a positive thing in that he viewed a woman to be less judgemental making the situation more bearable. This highlights the importance of gendered identity in Luke's disclosure of struggle, where feelings of shame were lessened if that disclosure is with a person that did not identify in the same way as him.

I just felt so embarrassed. I'm glad it was a girl instead of a man because I didn't want to be judged. Like I said, I've been on my own for a very long time. So, speaking to a female, a lady, I just didn't know how, I just felt basically, with speaking to [female advisor] instead of a man, because then a man would have, like being judged. Because this man who had businesses and who boxed and who was pretty healthy and all that, and then to having, basically, nothing. Being embarrassed. So, telling [female advisor] about my situation, that I've not been

able to eat for a while, not been able to cook anything, have a hot drink or…and I felt, it was pretty upsetting actually. (Luke, householder)

Another householder, Theo, was living alone in a private-rented flat, found himself in a similarly dire situation where benefits had been stopped and he was unable to afford food or electricity (via a prepayment meter). This had triggered a referral into the energy advice service (for an emergency fuel voucher and food parcel), but he was initially reluctant to accept any form of crisis support on the grounds that he wasn't the most vulnerable, and, in his words, was strong enough to endure a situation others might not. Although not explicitly communicated in terms of gender here, Theo, like Luke, related his situation to his gender and an expectation of being self-sufficient and not 'in need'. This expanded beyond gender, to consider other demographic groups her perceived to be more vulnerable than him:

> **Theo (householder):** …*when she said about foodbank thing, and I said, 'I'm sorry, I think there's other people who would be better…who deserve it more because I can go without food. I'm a strong person'*
>
> **Danielle (interviewer):** *Who then*?
>
> **Theo:** *People who can't get about, people who, older people, elderly people, people on the streets, they're out there in the cold, in the rain and the wind and all this hard weather we've been having and it's getting worse. People, I think, they should be helped more.*

Throughout the interview, Theo referred to the struggles of individuals and groups that fall under different social categories to himself. This went beyond traits associated with masculinity to include those experiencing homelessness, older people and mothers with small children, all perceived by Theo to be more vulnerable, and more in need.

6.3.4 Deserving and underserving (fuel) poor

The notion of categorising the poor as deserving or underserving, where the former is considered worthy of help because the experience of poverty is seen to not be their fault, dates to policy discourse of the nineteenth century (Linkon, 2015). This has been the subject of much theoretical and analytical work in the context of welfare and poverty more broadly (see, for example, Sims-Schouten *et al.*, 2019; Charman, 2019; Solas, 2018; Kootstra, 2016), but with little attention as yet in the context of fuel poverty. Middlemiss' (2017) examination of the politics and policy discourse surrounding governmental fuel poverty strategy in its current iteration (post introduction of the LIHC) does, however, offers reflections on this in reference to a more or less deserving fuel poor subject. However, rooted in policy discourse, framed by technical and medicalised models, not lived experience or behavioural factors, Middlemiss notes how this differs to that of work examining the welfare recipient. With an explicit policy focus on helping those most in need, or applying the 'worst-first' principle, deservingness in the context of fuel poverty policy is said to be determined by "those experiencing most difficulty in affording energy services, and those with specific physical characteristics which make them more vulnerable to the effects of cold" (Middlemiss, 2017, p.433). The implications of this for those who might be considered in policy terms or who consider themselves to be less severely affected is not well understood.

Interpretations of deservingness were shared by the interviewees. Some discussed at length their discomfort in being helped with energy-related and other problems due to a perception that they were less deserving than others. Others referred to key, typically interactional, identities in emphasising a level of deservingness (i.e., as a mother or taxpayer). Peers played a critical role here, not only in terms of having accessed

advice and support, as discussed earlier, but also in terms of providing a reference point for one's own perceived deservingness. Comparing oneself to others in similar situations could be positive in that it reduced feelings of stigma and shame, provided access to 'experts by experience' and brought about a sense of solidarity, as noted earlier. However, in an adverse way, this comparison also led to a withdrawal from or rejection of support in some cases due to the perception of being less deserving or more burdensome than someone facing a similar problem, but with a different set of circumstances. What characterised neediness or deservingness was subjectively assessed and conveyed differently by the interviews. In agreement, however, was that an identity shaped as being 'in need', whether due to health, income, housing condition, or a need for energy-related knowledge or information, was unwanted and uncomfortable. From a theoretically informed view, in terms of advice and support, it posed a significant threat to face (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

As Theo's account in the section above demonstrates, others were considered to be more in need and this corresponded with being more deserving of support; in this way, the two went hand-in-hand, not too dissimilar to the linkage in policy discourse noted above (Middlemiss, 2017). This was the predominant view of the householders when comparing themselves to others (as opposed to seeing themselves as equally or more deserving). Intriguingly, this was a view predominantly held by interviewees living alone: Charles, Luke, Theo, Patricia and Pippa all examined their own levels of need or deservingness against that of their peers or other householders facing similar or the same problems.

> *Yes, cos I was always, I feel embarrassed. I don't feel like. I don't feel worthy*
>
> *enough to be on the planet when there's other, there's lots of other people who*

need more help and now I feel like I'm taking up people's time. (Luke, householder)

I do feel for people on their own who have got nothing, I mean who do they turn to? It must be absolutely awful if you look and you think, right, do I put some money for the electric in or do I eat. It must be absolutely horrendous. (Patricia, householder)

…we're living in a low wage economy which makes me wonder about other people, you know, how do they cope? They must be struggling as well. You know even people that work, I've heard, so those actually at work say it is a struggle. (Charles, householder)

For Luke, who was particularly emotional in the telling of his story, this evoked deep reflection of his personal identity, and transpired into feeling embarrassed, unworthy, and burdensome. Like Theo, those who were older or responsible for the care of others (i.e., parents of dependent children) were positioned by the interviewees as more deserving than a single person of working age, seemingly regardless of health status. This raises important implications for how best to support those living in single parent or single person households, all of whom are disproportionately more likely to be living in fuel poverty compared to those living as part of a couple or multi-person household (BEIS, 2020). Added to this is greater financial and housing insecurity, as well as lower levels of well-being and self-reported happiness, all among a group that are rapidly growing in size (ONS, 2019).

Other interviewees, like Charles and Patricia, expressed more general concerns about how others were able to cope. Patricia noted the significance of a strong network of support from family and friends, suggesting those in state of being without – whether

in terms of finance or sources of support – are most in need, and therefore most deserving. Charles, although a retiree himself, noted how employment status did not neatly indicate more or less need or deservingness, relating to concerns regarding rising in-work poverty overall (Innes, 2020). Relating to the working fuel poor specifically, this is a particularly critical aspect in terms of identifying 'need', whereby estimates have suggested that of those in fuel poverty, a significant proportion (49 per cent) are households in employment (Howard, 2015). Yet, a stereotypical portrayal of fuel poverty, matched by a dominant focus in policy and research, has tended to be that of someone out of work, whether retired or in receipt of out of work benefits.

A specific way in which employment status was linked to deservingness could be found in discussions of entitlement to help and benefits. For Patricia, who had been diagnosed with cancer and was on long-term sick leave, a key aspect of her identity was as someone who had worked for many years and 'paid everything in' to the system:

> *And I left there [job centre] thinking, my god, I've worked all these years, I've paid everything in, and you are sat there and being told it's a shame you haven't got a couple of kids at home. When you've raised a family and worked from day one, when they were very small and just at that time when you need help, basically she [job centre advisor] said that there's nothing we can do.* (Patricia, householder)

For Patricia, having raised a family as a lone parent while in employment (and as she intimates, as a longstanding taxpayer) was a source of great pride, and a strong part of her personal and interactional identity as a working lone parent. Having not claimed out of work benefits in the past, and to be told that there was no entitlement to support in a time of need, compounded with an insensitive comment relating to the pejorative stereotype of the single mother on benefits (Salter, 2018), left Patricia feeling

'disgusted', as noted earlier. This experience threatened the two key components of her identity: as a worker and as a lone parent. Patricia's experience exposes an example of a failure in the social security system to adequately, appropriately and sensitively support people, in this case, when needing to access out of work benefits due to ill-health. It also illustrates the powerful role of identity work and language in the context of advice and support and how disregard or insensitivity relating to a person's sense of self, and valued identities, can have serious detrimental impacts. This is not only in terms of a sense of self (personal identity) or relationships with others (relational identities), but also in terms of engagement with support. This includes that which intends to alleviate energy vulnerability, as in the work of energy advisors.

The experiences of accessing a new form of support for the first time, as Patricia's example above illustrates, and as other interviewees noted, is particularly critical. This could be making contact with an advice service, speaking to a health professional about additional needs, requesting support from the local authority, applying for a charitable grant, accepting a fuel voucher or food parcel, or making a new benefit claim. The experiences of the latter specifically have been widely documented in the literature (see for example: De Wolfe, 2012; Patrick, 2014; Dwyer, 2019) as something that is frightening, challenging, typically lacking in adequate or appropriate support, evoking stigma and shame, and overall considered to be a key reason for non- or dis-engagement. This is a significant issue in the UK with annual estimates suggesting that in the most recent year for which data is available (2017/18), more than £15 billion of means tested benefits went unclaimed (DWP, 2020). If claimed, this could increase the income of some 8 million households (DWP, 2020), many of whom may be living in or at risk of fuel poverty. Resistance to making a benefit claim for the first time due to fear of the unknown was noted by the energy advisors and constituted a tricky

aspect of their everyday work which frequently involved assisting with benefit claims as a means of maximising income.

…because they've never claimed benefits, so they don't know that that's there. And convincing them to do it sometimes it's quite hard because they are so independent. You either get people going, 'yeah brilliant I'll do it' or you get people saying, 'I don't need support'. (Annabelle, advisor)

What this illustrates is that there is a particular importance with initial interactions and when supporting people to undertake something for the very first time. In such instances, honouring valued identities, being mindful of those rejected or unwanted, and ultimately, avoiding that which has the potential to threaten face, is critical. This has relevance not only for making benefit claims, but with other 'new experiences', too, such as switching to a new supplier, changing from a prepayment to a credit meter, or agreeing to retrofit work in the home.

In communicating perceived deservingness in the context of help and support with energy-related problems, interviewees often made reference to personal identities, (i.e., traits and characteristics, such as not being greedy or lazy), as well as interactional identities, such as not living with drug or alcohol addiction or past instances of criminality. These were often situated in moral frames (i.e., as a good or bad person). Michael, for example, who had no income following non-payment of his benefits, sought help from the local authority with accessing money to top up his electricity. In describing his overall experience, he positioned himself as deserving of support in this way, because:

I don't take drugs and I don't smoke. And I'm not greedy. I'm not like I said, I'm not an alcoholic, I don't go out and rob people, I am not a bad person. I'll help

anyone. Even if I've got the last pound in my pocket or the last ten pence and someone asks for it, I'd give it 'em. (Michael, householder)

This was similarly the case for Holly, who demonstrated a concern regarding being underserving of support due to the risk of being perceived as 'lazy'. In connecting this perception to her health status, she outlined:

And you know what, since I've been ill, I have not been that person, not able to look up or pick up a phone and look into things and the internet. I have been so...I'm not lazy, I don't like calling myself lazy, but you know, health-wise, you kind of get that you don't like doing things. It kind of puts you off because of your mood and stuff. (Holly, householder)

Perceived deservingness could also be interpreted in the way in which householders talked about the relationship between being helped and helping others: 'I am deserving of help, because I help others'. Conveying this aspect of personal identity, as someone who is helpful and useful, was important to many of the interviewees. As Luke describes below:

…if I can do anything for anyone, I will try and help, with my own injuries as well. I'll get someone a loaf of bread and milk, if I've got money, and I won't ask for the money back from the elderly people or the people that…I know a couple of people who do that, and I just feel happy that I've helped them. Because they're freezing cold, no-one speaks to them, they got no heating, it's just awful for some of them. For some of the people I've spoken to near me, who are living the same way, but they're too scared to say 'owt or ask for help. I just, like I said, I just kept knocking on doors trying to get help. (Luke, householder)

Overall, in communicating their experiences of energy vulnerability and other problems, the interviewees demonstrated a number of ways in which perceptions of being deserving or underserving of advice and support played a key role. It was not simply about being a good or bad person and was complicated by various other factors. Interviewees described a positive relationship between being 'in need' and a level of deservingness, similar to that found in fuel poverty policy discourse (Middlemiss, 2017), with more stereotypically vulnerable or at risk groups considered to be more deserving. Interestingly, health status carried less significance, and in ways was more stigmatised (Garthwaite, 2016), compared to factors such as age, household composition and parental status. In this way, more stable or fixed aspects of identity (i.e., master identities), such being older or living alone, positioned a person as more in need or more deserving. Householders detailed many poor experiences of support and asserted deservingness in relation to these experiences and against aspects of identity and previous actions (i.e., as a working mother and in having helped others).

To date, there has been limited exploration of deservingness in the context of fuel poverty and energy vulnerability, but some insights are presented here. Further questions are raised, however, with one being to what extent feeling less deserving may play a role in the resistance or rejection of energy-related advice and support? While stoicism and trust are common factors for a lack of engagement among 'hard to reach' or 'hard to engage' energy consumers (Howden-Chapman *et al.*, 2012; Waitt & Harada, 2019; Ambrose *et al*, 2019), the role of identity and feeling more or less deserving is less well understood.

6.3.5 Liminal transitions

In examining the ways in which our sense of self is socially and phenomenologically constructed in the stories we tell of our lived experiences, Langdridge (2007) refers to our identities – or narrative selves – as "contingent" and "subject to change" (2007, p.52). This has similarly been drawn upon in energy research exploring everyday energy ethics and changes in energy-using practices that occur alongside and as a result of significant shifts in identity (Groves *et al.*, 2017). Termed *liminal transitions*, and centred on identity work around lifecourse transitions, a key example of this given by Groves *et al.* (2017) is the shift from living as a single person to one half of a married couple, and the reconfiguration and negotiation required around energy and other "essential constituents of lives lived well" (p.10).

The interviews, adopting a narrative approach, asked participants to share their storied accounts of energy-related problems, from what triggered or caused the problem, through to the experiences of advice and support, possible resolutions, and life since and beyond. As such, transition and change consumed these narratives of energy use and vulnerability, as did reflections of the elements that make up essential constituents of a life lived well (i.e., sufficient fuel and energy services, contact with friends and family, food, clothes, the ability to leave the home to walk or shop).

Transitions for the interviewees were set against changes in various markers of health, employment and relationship status, as well as household composition, and this was frequently related to energy use and practices. These shifts and changes were not simply talked about in practical or circumstantial ways, they were personal and emotional, and involved expressions of key identities subjected to liminal transitions: a mother to a single person living alone; a full-time worker to someone unemployed; a person who was fit and active but now unwell and relatively immobile; someone

without worry for finances or thermal comfort, to someone consumed by anxiety around it; a source of help to someone in need. Considering transitions in terms of the more personal and emotional (i.e., through key identities) alongside the practical and circumstantial, then, has importance for extending current understanding of both energy vulnerability and related advice and support.

With regards to the conceptualisation of energy vulnerability put forward by Middlemiss and Gillard (2017), the ontological stance of *multi-dimensionality* – "recognising that people experience vulnerability in different ways" (p.149) - is particularly important. With a focus on transition in the interviews, it was not just the householders' circumstances that changed, but also their sense of self or how they saw themselves and their perceived capacity to cope. A particularly notable transition was that of living with others to living alone: 13 out of 18 householders had experienced this whether this was due to the end of a relationship, children leaving the family home, or the loss of or separation from a spouse or partner. One example of this can be found in the stories shared by Jean and Charles, who had both transitioned to living alone after adult children left the home.

For Jean, a transition towards identifying as someone 'living alone' was regarded positively in terms of energy use and related vulnerability. A reduction in showers and baths and use of the heating system, the latter involving a return to her preferred level of thermal comfort, meant that energy use no longer needed to be negotiated and consequently energy costs were now "*manageable*". As she described:

> …*at the moment because I am on my own, I don't use a lot of electric and gas, to be fair. But it's very different when you've got the family and you're bathing and you're showering. But the fact that I'm now one on my own and I don't like*

> *it hot anyway, so I don't have the heating on. So, it's all manageable at the*
> *moment.* (Jean, householder)

For Charles, who suffered with a serious respiratory condition exacerbated by being unable to keep his home warm, the transition to living alone after his adult daughter had moved out was one marked by vulnerability in terms of managing his health and the home:

> *I've seen a few health professionals and a consultant, and I've had a few stays*
> *in hospital but they never really, they were more concerned with my physical*
> *wellbeing, they never actually picked into too much about my home*
> *circumstances. Well, because, like I say, I don't have a partner, I live alone so*
> *some things are a bit of a struggle.* (Charles, householder)

In practical terms both Jean and Charles experienced the same shift in household composition; for Jean it resulted in a more empowered personal identity, while Charles felt less powerful and more in need. Although not drawn out explicitly here, within these two examples is also the clear role that social relations are likely to have played. Both Jean and Charles talked positively about their relationships with their children but the practical differences in those relationships were not commented on in any detail. With Charles, for instance, his account suggests that his daughter leaving has left him solely responsible for domestic duties, and this presents a struggle; for Jean, the opposite seems to be the case. While these practical and relational aspects are important, the data suggests that a person's sense of self or the role of key identities – an aspect that has received limited attention to date - also plays a significant role.

Some of the interviewees charted their experiences back several weeks and months; for some, the stories shared went back years. However, all of the interviewees'

accounts arrived at the present day, prompted in many cases by being asked directly: "and what about your situation now?" Intriguingly, all eighteen householders identified themselves, in some way and at times contradictory to other parts of their accounts, as living in a situation that was, as Jean put it, "…*manageable at the moment*". Especially when asked directly, there was a keenness to respond by asserting a state of not being 'in need' at present. This was typically rooted in energy being more affordable, whether from reduced energy use or an increase in income:

> …*that's it, that's all. Now that [debt] is sorted, everything is ok, and I can pay my bills.* (Elizabeth, householder)

> …*because I am getting extra benefits, that is actually manageable now. I can now afford my bills, because as I say the new boiler which is more efficient and because I'm on a slightly lower tariff. So, the bills are affordable…it is not as difficult as it was. It was a real struggle at one time. As I say, I was stuck between 'can I eat, and can I afford* [heating]*?' because I had one of those key meters.* (George, householder)

> …*now I'm able to, because before I was a bit frightened of running the central heating because it was a very expensive and I have to have it on for a while to heat, to heat the flat because, as I say, it's large Victorian rooms, high ceilings, little bit difficult to heat, there's no double glazing, no, what do you call it, damp proofing things, so I have to be very careful that I don't get too cold in the flat. winter is a bit of a struggle.* (Pippa, householder)

> …*everything now is fine.* (Celine, householder)

Considered as standalone reflections, such proclamations indicate that an energy-related problem has been resolved and that a need for advice or support is no longer

there. However, analysis of the overall accounts shared by the interviewees showed that for many, problems, such as ill-health and dealing with energy suppliers, persisted and circumstances in many ways had not changed. For the six interviewees who were identified as individuals that had been supported by an energy advisor at Citizens Advice, this may have been a concerted effort to communicate satisfaction with the help they had received. For others though, the same motivation to identify as managing at present was not there. In terms of identity work, this may suggest a greater ease at recounting stories of hardship in the past, referring to more vulnerable selves as past selves. If identity work can create a veneer of coping or managing with energy problems in the context of a research interview, this could also factor in other instances of communicating energy vulnerability, whether being cold at home or having energy debts, such as those with an advisor or energy supplier. This evidences that individuals may not always disclose the full extent of the problems they face, understandably or otherwise in the context of saving 'face' and not wanting to be a burden. This potential disconnect, between the self-disclosure of one's problems and the wider reality of the situation, has important implications for identifying those facing challenges associated with energy vulnerability, and also the delivery of energy-related advice and support.

6.3.6 Summarising the role of the self and valued identities

In examining the role of others in the context of energy vulnerability and wider advice research, the literature review and data analysis presented here has illustrated the importance of considering 'the self', referred to here as key or valued identities. Therefore, it is not just about the role of others but also the roles we ascribe to ourselves: "We must locate identity within the social arena with concepts such as roles in order to account for the complex negotiations which characterise the making of

identities" (Gough, McFadden and McDonald, 2013, p.168). The analysis identified valued (and rejected) markers of identity related to energy status (as a consumer, customer or professional), gendered norms and expectations, perceived deservingness, and life transitions. It has expanded upon the work of Hargreaves and Middlemiss (2020), examining social identity as not only an important factor in understanding broader energy use and demand, but also in discrete instances of vulnerability, struggle and in receiving advice and support.

6.4 Social relations and presenting problems

Before drawing the first two findings chapters to a close and moving into a more focused discussion of the 'effectiveness' of energy advice and support in terms of *process* (Chapter Seven), this section will briefly examine the relationship between the overarching thematic areas set out so far: the way in which we talk about energy as problematic (Chapter Five), and the key roles and identities at play in navigating such problems (this chapter, Chapter Six). In later stages of the analysis, when drawing back from individual cases and transcripts, clear differences were noted. An overview of this is set out in Table 6.3 below and explained in further detail in the text that follows.

	Affordability	**Health**	**Use/saving**
Social relations	Mostly -ve	Mostly +ve	+/-ve
Self	Mostly -ve	-ve	+/-ve

Table 6.3: Mapping social relations and valued identities onto energy problem areas

While relations with others and the different typologies of key identities varied in terms of whether they were experienced positively or negatively by the interviewees, considering these more broadly against each of three problematic areas highlighted

distinct differences. In narratives of dealing with the costs of energy or paying energy bills, relating to a general sense of unaffordability, the householders' experiences of relationships with others was mostly negative. This was similarly the case in references to the self: rejected or unwanted identities were more commonly drawn out rather than those valued or interpreted in a more positive light. In narratives of energy vulnerability and health, the interviewees focused on the role of others (i.e., health professionals and caring friends and relatives) as something largely positive. In contrast, when talking about themselves and key identities in relation to health and energy-related problems, the tone was overwhelmingly negative. Regarding energy use and saving, however, the tone of the narratives whether relating to the role of others or the self was less clearly tipped one way or the other towards positive or negative experiences overall.

The intention here is not to generalise the experiences of the interviewees, namely the householders. However, considering aspects of the interviewees' stories as shared experiences, whether direct personal experience and that of informal others (i.e., friends and family), provided a sense of what was perceived to be the norm. Considering Abraham's (1986) words, it not only captures the 'extraordinary' but also the 'ordinary', the 'typicality', and enables the analysis to, as McIntosh and Wright (2018) outline, develop these reflections and compare and contrast lived experiences. This draws out and considers what is referred to as the 'shared typical', drawing on and foregrounding valuable insights into the ways in which lived experience is shaped and mediated by policy and practice (MacIntosh & Wright, 2019).

Turning to policy and practice then, this is particularly helpful for informing approaches that seek to strengthen the design and delivery of energy-related advice and support, in particular that which demonstrates a sensitivity to and awareness of key roles and

relations. It provides an indication of where the style and form of advice and support may need to differ, and what challenges may arise in relation to this. For instance, negative perceptions of self in relation to health and energy-related problems is a particularly sensitive area and may account for some instances where energy advice and support is not taken up or avoided. In terms of dealing with affordability, and critical related issues such as mounting debt, approaches that seek to better understand and address poor relationships, such as that between a supplier and the customer, presents a clear opportunity in policy and practice.

6.5 Chapter Summary

Contributing to a gap in the existing evidence base (Hargreaves & Middlemiss, 2020), this chapter has focused on the role of social relations and the self in the context of energy vulnerability and the lived experiences of energy-related advice and support. Part one responds specifically to the second research question which asks *'what is the role of others [in energy advice and support] across formal and informal contexts?* In placing a spotlight on *who* is involved in the experiences of energy vulnerability and related advice and support, it centres on the third tenet of Goldsmith's (2004) CMoA, where effectiveness is considered to be enhanced where socially enacted support (i.e., advice-giving) acknowledges key roles and relations.

The analysis sets out four characterisations of key relations, including the role of experts, allies, peers, and antagonists. The interviewees drew on their experiences of contact with an extensive array of different actors, with the type, form and regularity of that contact varying greatly. The characterisations of these different roles provide insight as to which actors are understood to be part of the solution, which are part of the problem, and instances where the distinction is less clear or shifting. What can

also be drawn out from the analysis is that across the narrative accounts, as with it being a rarity for individuals to be encountering one problem at any given time, it was similarly the case that experiences of energy problems and related advice and support rarely involved contact with a single source or a single interaction. What the interviewees' accounts show is that the lived experience of energy-related advice and support is often complex and comprising of manifold interactions and sources.

The second part of the chapter shifted the focus away from relations with others towards the self. As noted, the way in which people see themselves has implications for how they are understood, the targeting of policy, and their interactions with others (Hargreaves and Middlemiss, 2020). Four characterisations – referred to as valued (and rejected) identifies – were set out and these included those related to interpretations of self as an energy consumer or advisor, gendered norms and expectations, perceptions of deservingness, and shifts in identities around changes in circumstances.

Chapter Seven: Understanding Effectiveness

7.1 Introduction

The previous two chapters have drawn on the lived experience of energy vulnerability and related advice and support to focus on the way in which problems are framed and relations and identities are foregrounded. This, the third and final findings chapter, turns the focus towards *process*, considering more specifically the third and fourth research questions that ask: '*What shapes and hinders the effectiveness of energy advice and support?'* and '*How is the relationship between the formal and informal in the context of energy-related advice and support understood, and what are the implications for policy and practice*?'

Narratives of effectiveness will be explored around three areas (see Table 7.1 below): the importance of time and place, communication, and the role of emotions. Following this, in the final section of the chapter, a broader discussion relating to the way in which 'effectiveness' is understood, and how this is problematic, in policy and practice will be outlined.

CHAPTER SEVEN: PROCESS **Effective advice as meaningful, situated, rhetorical**	
Theme Three: *Effectiveness*	
Determinants	1. Time and place
	2. '*Those three words*': communication
	3. Emotions
	4. Effectiveness as elusive

Table 7.1: Theme three - process

In examining the factors that shape and hinder the perceived effectiveness of the social process of energy-related advice and support (EAS), it is worth revisiting key

elements of Goldsmith's (2004) CMoA – the guiding theoretical model utilised in this research, as discussed at length in Chapter Three. This specifically relates to the second and fourth tenets of the model, which state that:

- advice is opportunistic, situational, sometimes only part of it is considered useful, and more useful in certain situations compared to others
- how advice is given is important in terms of perceived helpfulness, sensitivity, and supportiveness.

In addition to the tenets restated above, of specific relevance here, are the three assumptions underpinning how effective 'enacted support' can be characterised. As discussed in Chapter Three, this centres on an understanding and assessment of effectiveness that is *meaningful, situated* and *rhetorical* (see Table 7.2)*.*

'Effective' support is:	Definition of the term	Implications of this in context of EAS
Meaningful	"a communication approach [to enacted support] focuses not on behaviours but on meaningful actions" (2004, p.31)	What are some of the meaningful actions identified in my data? How do we define 'meaningful action'? What are the limitations/issues with the focus on behaviours?
Situated	Brings context to the fore, highlighting how "the way that advice is given and interpreted, and the potential effects on the recipient, are likely to differ depending on the context in which it occurs" (2004, p.41)	Time and place matters. What are the different places in which people seek and receive EAS? Are approaches, situated in time, preventative or reactive?
Rhetorical	A focus on "achieving some purpose in a particular social context" (2004, p.45) – doing something.	Outcomes focused is the status quo (evaluation research) but who decides what the purpose is? Achievements are largely quantified but what are the limitations of this?

Table 7.2: Assumptions underpinning the effectiveness of EAS in Goldsmith's CMoA (2004)

The following sections will now consider three key areas where factors or determinants of effectiveness were drawn from the analysis.

7.2 The Importance of time and place

As Goldsmith's (2004) CMoA highlights, the *situatedness* of enacted support – herein referred to as energy-related advice and support – plays a critical role. It brings context to the fore, not just in terms of *where* advice and support occurs, but also *when*. As discussed above, situatedness is one of three theoretically informed assumptions underpinning what constitutes effective advice and support, and, in the analysis of the interviews with energy advisors and householders, this aspect of determining and describing the effectiveness of energy-related advice and support featured prominently. The following sections will focus here - on context and the importance of time (temporality) and place (spatiality) - drawing out several ways in which situatedness interacted with understandings of effectiveness. In other words, how the interviewees' (energy advisors and recipients of energy advice) experiences of time and place are understood to shape or hinder the effectiveness of EAS.

7.2.1 Introducing the temporality of effectiveness

The following sections will first explore temporality, which as phenomenological enquiry (van Manen, 2012) notes, relates to the way in which time is experienced with respect to the phenomenon being studied (see Chapter Four). From the analysis, this relationship between time and effectiveness was communicated in four ways:

- **Never having enough time:** advisors not having enough time to meet the needs of those coming through the service or the demand of the service in terms of numbers

- **Interactions and solutions not moving fast enough**: reconciling impatience and urgency, whether in terms of clients setting out problems or the response/solution provided

- **Hidden coping versus crisis response:** when advice is given in the timeline of the problem is important

- **A seasonality to hardship:** moments when vulnerability is exacerbated and provides a potential opportunity for the provision of effective EAS

"It takes a lot of time"

The first element of time discussed in relation to the effectiveness of EAS was rooted in the energy advisors' experiences of overwhelming demand for the service they were delivering. All six described not having enough time as a major hindrance. A common view was that they would never be able to support the number of people needing help with energy and other related problems:

> *I think you could probably build an entire call centre as big as this building just doing what we do, and there's only three people doing it!* (Andrew, energy advisor)

Mostly, the interviewees set this notion of need outstripping capacity against the context that for large sections of society in the UK life has become increasingly more difficult as a result of lower incomes and rising living costs. Demand for the service or need for support was particularly acute for those the energy advisors considered most vulnerable in terms of income and health, and as such these individuals were described as the typical type of client they supported in their daily roles, as Annabelle outlined:

I mostly see people on lower incomes. And if someone's on benefits they are generally just, just about surviving. And every year it gets worse and worse but right now it is just horrific. (Annabelle, energy advisor)

This chimes with wider analysis of the current landscape, as set out in Chapter Two, where demand for advice services, including energy advice, has increased drastically in recent years – linked, as a number of commentators have suggested, to a decade of austerity measures and economic stagnation, resulting in widening inequalities (Middlemiss, 2017; Stanley, Deville & Montgomerie, 2016). Compounding this further, there have been significant funding cuts to the advice sector as a whole, not just affecting energy advice (Centre for Sustainable Energy, 2020). Parkinson and Buttrick (2015) refer to this as a 'double squeeze', noting that "whilst advice agencies contribute to a range of outcomes for local and national government, they are not a statutory service" rendering them "particularly vulnerable to cuts" (2015, p.17).

Consistent across the narrative accounts of the energy advisors was an emphasis that energy advice work is extremely time consuming – "*it takes a lot of time, a lot of* time" (Annabelle, energy advisor) - and is a form of professional practice that cannot be rushed or made more time efficient with alterations or shortcuts. There was a real sense of frustration and sadness in asking the energy advisors what constituted the hardest part of their jobs, which across all six interviews was rooted in some way to not having enough time and wanting to be able to do more. As Henri described:

Clients can be difficult obviously, in terms of not getting back to you or getting angry or upset or whatever, but it doesn't bother me, and the only thing that would bother me is that you want to help them as much as you can and not being able to do that because there is so much work or coz there's not enough hours in the day or whatever. (Henri, energy advisor)

The policy context here is critical and the pressures felt by the energy advisors echoes that noted elsewhere in the literature. This is not a new problem, as the work of Boardman (2016), Klein (2015), Parkinson and Buttrick (2015), the Low Commission (2014), Stockton *et al.* (2018) and others have shown. However, advice work, inclusive of energy advice, continues to face growing demand and pressure in a policy context where, as Boardman (2016) states, it continues to be a valuable asset unrecognised by official policy in tackling key social issues such as fuel poverty.

Time pressure and impatience

Compounded by the pressure of high demand and limited time, the energy advisors expressed that often they felt frustrated with advice interactions not moving fast enough. This was typically discussed in terms of needing to adopt a balance between patiently allowing the client sufficient time to describe their situation – to communicate their energy vulnerability - while also trying to move as quickly as possible to gather key information, such as identifying sources and types of income, details of energy suppliers or tariffs, or household circumstances. In this regard, the energy advisors expressed how a common part of their role was moving the conversation along or regaining focus on that which is 'relevant' and having to reconcile a typically unwanted sense of impatience in acknowledging that "*people just want to tell you their life story*" (Phoebe, energy advisor).

With regards to the effective delivery of EAS, then, the advisors described achieving this balance through a process of finding the relevant, or, as Andrew refers to below, 'controlling the conversation':

> *Yes, controlling the conversation, getting the important information. It's*
>
> *normally things like dates and times, things that would actually help. It's*

difficult because these are problems that bring a lot of emotion for people. So it's only natural that they're going to, you know… 'this made me feel like and I told my neighbour and he can't believe it and when I tell all of my friends and everyone says it's bad', and it's like, 'well getting back to what the actual issue, I'm sure Jim at the pub says it is awful but in terms of…we need to just focus on dealing with it'. So, a lot of the time it is trying to…it sounds quite bad, it sounds like everyone just rabbits on but a lot of the time, but you need to. It's because it's emotional. A lot of the time it's just cause your time limited. That's the thing if you had the luxury of sitting there, I wouldn't mind sitting and talking all day, but we are up against the clock and I'm kind of thinking the next one is going to be here in 15 minutes and we've not got to what the presenting issue is, never mind actually dealing with it. (Andrew, energy advisor)

As this quote highlights, hurrying the interaction along was not the advisor's preferred approach to enacted support and engagement in meaningful action. Aligned with the fourth tenet of Goldsmith's (2004) CMoA, effective advice and support is not only understood in practical terms but is also sensitive and supportive. This sheds light on a particularly important aspect of the experiences of communicating energy vulnerability: the practical, actionable information required by an energy advisor is embedded within much wider, deeper, and richer narratives of life, involving multiple actors and settings, and accessible largely through the telling of life stories, showing the home, drawing on objects such as energy bills, all of which can be highly emotional. This amplifies the human element of communicating energy vulnerability and the provision of related advice and support. It also highlights the limitations of technical-rational models, noted earlier in the thesis, that frame (and evaluate) such

support as a technical process where details are extracted from a person, entered into a 'advice' system, with the output being the form of a suggested course of action. Advice and support, as the interviewees explained, is complex, nuanced, and emotional. As such, a key part of the advice process is accepting that getting to the problem is part of that process; the 'fixing' involves identifying the problem as much as it does identify and actioning solutions or next steps. Therefore, allowing time for the telling can be understood as important for shaping effective EAS, whereas, overall, a persistent lack of time is a hindrance.

A sense of impatience or immediacy was not only attached to the energy advisors' efforts to ascertain the circumstances and details related to their clients' experiences of energy vulnerability; clients of the energy advice service – or householders as referred to here – often turned to quick(er) fixes and solutions. Discussed in Chapter Six, this often involved the role of peers, mainly relatives and close friends, who were able to provide more immediate easing of difficulties compared to other actors seen to provide slower resolutions. As Celine, a 59-year-old single adult, living in the private rented sector, responded when asked what happens at the point of self-disconnection from gas and electricity:

> *Definitely, family members because it's urgent, you know what I mean, you could try and contacting your suppliers, but they're not necessarily gonna do anything about it, and if you've run out of gas and electric and you've got a young family, it's you know, it's urgent, isn't it?* (Celine, householder)

On occasion, this also resulted in withdrawal from more formalised channels of support: "…*sometimes clients pull out, so they just go, 'Oh, I've managed to get a fridge off me sister now, so can you just stop, can you close this?'.*" (Henri, energy advisor). An implication of this is that while a more immediate presenting issue may

be overcome (i.e., the need for a fridge), other related issues may not be picked up or addressed (for example, strained income due to high energy costs or persistent debt).

As well as balancing time pressures relating to the advice interaction (between allowing the unfolding of a client's circumstances versus needing to find only relevant details), energy advisors as allies also described a dilemma associated with choosing to act fast but not necessarily in the best long-term interest of their clients. As Phoebe explained:

> *…what I've been doing is contacting the supplier and asking for an emergency wind on, which is what some companies call it, which is basically when they put credit onto the meter and then recover it as a debt. But that means you're putting clients into debt so that they can heat their homes and that's just not best practice but it's a way the client can eat because then they can cook, and how they can heat their house.* (Phoebe, energy advisor)

This adds to the 'squeeze' felt in delivering effective advice and support described by Parkinson and Buttrick (2015). In this and the previous section, this squeeze is experienced by the energy advisors and advice recipients as not having enough time to support enough people or in enough depth and feeling pressured to 'do' advice faster or find faster fixes. The two are necessarily linked, and both highlight how temporality hinders the capacity to provide effective EAS. The experiences of the energy advisors demonstrate that there is significant demand for EAS and not enough resource to support everyone currently in need. Consequently, as this section has outlined, provision can be rushed, more pressurised than necessary, and result in turning to quicker, arguably less beneficial or appropriate long-term solutions.

Hidden coping versus crisis response

In the timeline of an energy-related problem the point at which advice is given matters. Several studies have focused here. For example, Rotmann (2020), Ambrose *et al.* (2016) and Thompson *et al.* (2011) have pointed towards the importance of identifying 'moments of change', echoing work of Darby (2004) where advice and support is considered to be most effective when 'opportunistic' and 'client-led'. The work of Grove *et al.* (2017) in calling focus to liminal transitions, as discussed in Chapter Five, similarly draws attention to temporal dimensions of the lived experience of energy, including experiences of energy vulnerability.

In investigating optimal timepoints in giving energy-related advice and support, past studies, such as those noted above, have typically focused on mechanisms to maximise levels of householder engagement. The analysis here, however, highlights that the point in time at which EAS occurs is also a critical factor in shaping or hindering its effectiveness. The energy advisors highlighted that commonly their involvement occurred some way into the timespan of an energy-related problem and at the point at which problems had typically become more troublesome, complex, and interwoven with other issues (e.g., multiple, mounting debts). Clients were, therefore, often considered at crisis point. Noting the difference in capacity to deliver effective EAS between the 'early stage' and the 'last minute' of an energy-related problem, Andrew and Arthur, both energy advisors, explained:

> *A lot of the time it's that have come in with fuel arrears and it seems that's what prompts them to come in. They don't normally come in when they're managing their bills and you know, they might have high consumption and perhaps need a bit of advice on reducing their bills - they rarely come in at that early stage.*
> (Andrew, energy advisor)

It's normally people who have maybe buried their head in the sand and come to us at the last minute. It's very difficult then because you're very limited then…We don't have a magic wand unfortunately and that can be quite difficult for some clients. (Arthur, energy advisor)

Both examples point toward a more optimal time being the 'early stage' for delivering effective EAS. From the energy advisor's perspective, the sooner EAS occurs after a problem emerges, the more options available and the more effective that provision can be. However, it is important to note that, despite both the above examples placing responsibility on the householder for seeking out support and identifying when best to do so, this was not the general view of the interviewees. The energy advisors noted that the 'early stage' of a problem or the (often lengthy) period of hidden coping prior to crisis is difficult to identify, less important or pressurised than other problems faced, and/or lacks the level of pressure to act. This could be as a householder seeking out help or as someone identifying need in another person whether professionally (via advice services for example) or personally (with relatives or friends).

As the data highlighted in Chapter Five, supported by other research examining the lived experiences of fuel poverty, often people do not consider themselves as in need of support, or as much in priority need as others (Scottish Government, 2020, Snell *et al.*, 2018). A number of the interviewees relayed examples of clients, friends, relatives and others they knew, as being on the 'edge' between hidden coping and crisis. As Phoebe highlighted:

…she's a single parent and she just can't afford it. Energy is just not affordable for her she's not in debt but just always on the edge with it. (Phoebe, energy advisor)

There has been recent acknowledgement of this hidden aspect of energy vulnerability in policy, notably with prepayment customers where the difference between self-rationing energy use (hidden coping) and self-disconnection (crisis) from energy supply has been used to typify varying experiences that require similar energy market protections (Ofgem, 2020). Energy affordability, as with Phoebe's close friend in the quote above, forms the central focus of these policy directions, with suppliers being required to, among other things, appropriately assess a household's ability to pay (discussed also in Chapter Five with regards to poor energy debt practices).

The time point of the problem was also described as differing in terms of source and form of support; the early stages of hidden coping generally involved informal sources, such as relatives and friends, whereas later points in crisis typically involved more formalised sources, such as the experts and allies discussed in Chapter Six (e.g., Citizens Advice services). Use of online sources, such as advice forums, were used in the earlier stages, whereas face-to-face contact with energy advice agencies, for instance, were noted at later stages in instances of crisis support. Similar findings have been noted in housing research exploring advice and support needs (McKee, Moore & Crawford, 2015) where family, friends and online sources were sought out for advice and support ahead of advice agencies and other formalised actors. While the former commonly was able to offer advice and support rooted in direct experience, the latter were more highly valued in times of crisis. With regards to the situatedness of energy-related advice and support specifically, considering Goldsmith's (2004) CMoA, this raises important implications for understanding how effectiveness plays out at different time points. As Arthur's quote outlines above, the capacity of the advisor to provide effective EAS is all but diminished in some cases because formalised support has not been sought out until crisis point. However, what these findings also illustrate, similar

to those in McKee, Moore and Crawford's (2015) study, is the value of informal sources of support during periods referred to here as pre-crisis, where coping and EAS is arguably hidden from formal processes and policy, and therefore less well understood.

As well as the escalation of energy-related problems meaning that often single issues became multiple, interwoven constraints (i.e., multiple debts), the interviewees also shared examples of where, in the timeline of a problem, ineffective advice and support from a single initial source had resulted in the (often unnecessary) involvement of multiple actors. This relates to the notion set out in Chapter Five that the typical experience of energy problems and energy vulnerability is one shrouded with missed opportunities. The experience shared by Elizabeth, a self-employed lone parent of five children, demonstrates this. In Figure 7.1 below outlines Elizabeth's experience involving a move to a new property where details of the existing energy supply had not been communicated to her or cancelled. Eighteen months later, she received a wrongly issued backdated energy bill which took several months to resolve. Ultimately, Elizabeth, who struggled to afford her household bills and borrowed money from family, had the energy debt recognised as wrongfully issued and was offered compensation. This was after seeking advice and support via several different sources.
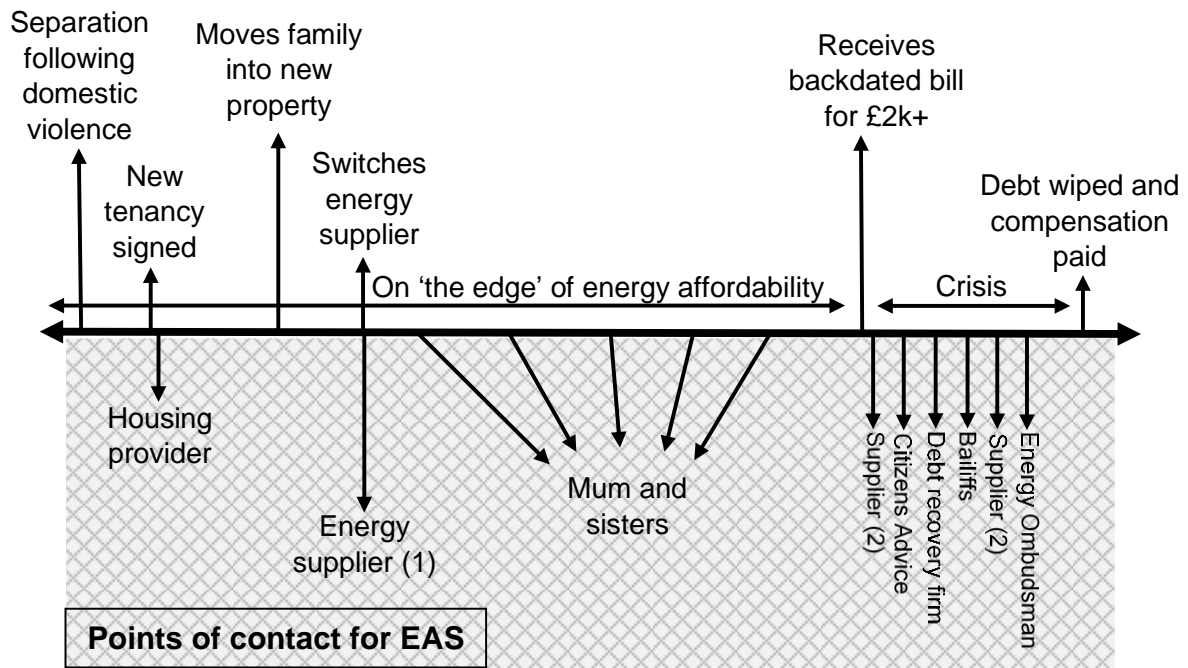
Figure 7.1: Timeline of Elizabeth's energy-related problem: a wrongly issued energy debt

Elizabeth's experience here highlights the roles of allies, peers, and antagonists (discussed in Chapter six). And, specifically with the latter, a common experience of dealing with those assuming this role (here referring to her energy supplier and a debt recovery form) was one fraught with frustration at problems not being resolved at the first point of contact. If, as the analysis here suggests, the effectiveness of EAS is related to the time point at which it occurs, with 'the earlier the better' being the stance of the energy advisors interviewed, then getting advice and support right first time is paramount. Research in 2014 by the Low Commission similarly highlighted this in setting out the importance of 'reducing preventable demand' across the welfare services and the advice sector. Alongside addressing the source of the problem not the just the problem itself, establishing early action programmes, and ensuring clear, appropriate communication (discussed later in this chapter), 'right first time' was one of the key goals in reducing preventable demand.

As well as reference to inadequacies in EAS provision at the 'early stage', challenges were also noted in providing effective EAS at much later time points. The energy

advisors discussed how delivering EAS effectively at a later stage and typically in times of crisis was hindered by inflexibility of the systems and processes to provide a sort of fuel poverty emergency response. As Henri (energy advisor) explained:

> *I've had a couple of occasions where I've felt there was a real emergency situation with the client and wanted to fast track an application [to a charitable trust fund], like I had one there was an elderly lady who just got out of hospital she's really ill, I think she had had pneumonia and she had no hot water or heating, was living on her own, and it was in winter, and it was I was saying, 'look we need to fast track this application for a boiler, this is a total emergency', and they were just really, they were difficult about it, they were really negative about it and really, uh…* (Henri, energy advisor)

The capacity to act in an emergency was a major challenge noted by Henri who expressed frustration in relation to a couple of cases, including the one above, where he believed his expertise and experience as an energy advisor should enable certain aspects and processes to work faster or more flexibly. In this way, the capacity of the energy advisor to identify need, in this case priority need, in the middle ground between the householder and forms of (mostly financial) support (e.g., trust fund payments for debt write-off, grants for physical measures, etc.) constrained, in their view, their ability to provide effective, meaningful EAS in times of crisis. As well as a need to better understand what emergencies in the context of fuel poverty might involve, Henri's experience also points towards a need to better understand what a fuel poverty emergency response could look like, who it would involve, and what systems and processes are needed.

The effectiveness of energy-related advice and support can be considered not only in terms of the significance of the timeline of the energy problem, but also in relation to different times of the month or year. Interviews with householders who had experiences of energy vulnerability highlighted a seasonality to their hardship with, unsurprisingly, much greater vulnerability and energy-related stress in the colder, winter months.

> *…summer is easy because I live on the ground floor and the bay windows face south so that's a godsend. So, in the summer it is ok.* (Charles, householder)

> *I think this year, we've been very, very lucky, we've had a very mild winter. I haven't used an awful lot more in the winter as I would have in the summer. It's been absolutely fine.* (Joyce, householder)

Energy usage during winter months in the UK has been estimated at 36% more than that in summer months (Gausden, 2020), meaning increased energy costs and a greater strain on those struggling financially. Considering that energy-related advice and support is regarded as most effective when 'opportunistic' (Darby, 1999), this temporal dimension of energy vulnerability has significance. There are links here also to the timeline of energy problems discussed in the section above. A seasonal impact to energy vulnerability means that it is more likely that households will experience crisis during or shortly after the more expensive, energy intensive periods of the year (i.e., the winter months). Crisis response can therefore be considered more opportunistic in nature at this time.

However, 'opportunistic' in relation to this could be understood in two ways. The first, as above, points towards an understanding of 'opportunistic' in the sense that an

increase of those experiencing crisis is likely to mean an increase in those needing and seeking out support. In contrast, however, the second understanding of 'opportunistic' could be in terms of seeing EAS as most effective before crisis (as discussed above). This means that a more opportune moment to address energy-related problems could be during warmer, less energy intensive months where preventative, proactive support can be targeted towards those in the early stages of an energy problem. This indicates a need for clarity in policy and practice when setting benchmarks for the effectiveness of energy-related advice and support where 'advice as opportunistic' is included.

In the UK, then, January is a particularly vulnerable period for many in terms of time spent at home, energy use, thermal comfort, and household finances. Martha, Celine and Elizabeth, all sharing stories of their experiences as lone parents, described the intense pressure at this time at year weighted by needs and expectations associated with Christmas, winter, and school holidays. Similar pressures have been noted in research exploring the costs of school holidays among low-income families (Stewart, Watson & Campbell, 2018). Explaining the switch from a typically cheaper credit meter to a typically more expensive prepayment meter, Martha outlined the significance of January to her:

> *The reason I originally went onto meters, when I first started, I used to pay my bills, but I had a young family, and I had an electric bill and a gas bill, and a phone bill all came in the January. And at that time, it was just impossible, I was working part-time, it wasn't possible. So, I contacted the companies and then that's why I had the meters put in. And the meters have just stayed.* (Martha, householder)

Martha's experience demonstrates the possible long-term implications of actions taken to respond to an energy-related problem in times of crisis, in this case being unable to pay an energy debt so opting to pay via a prepayment meter. Martha contacted her energy suppliers in the first instance and was advised that the outstanding debt could be repaid by switching to a prepayment meter, a more expensive payment method that has ultimately been kept for more than ten years. At the point of being interviewed, Martha explained that she still felt nervous about her ability to afford her energy bills many years later and this was a primary motivation for sticking with the prepayment meter, despite being aware that it was not the cheapest method of paying for her gas and electricity costs. This illustrates the value in tracing narratives of energy-related problems and vulnerability back in time and how decisions pertaining to energy-related circumstances in the present (i.e., having a prepayment meter) can be rooted in experiences from many years earlier. As such, 'overcoming' energy vulnerability is arguably not just about changing circumstances or conditions, but a process also requiring support in the shift of emotions, namely feelings of reassurance, confidence and trust.

In terms of effectively targeting advice and support during warmer periods of the year and consequently times associated less with crisis, online sources of advice and support were described as being particularly proactive. As Holly (householder) illustrated from her experience as a regular user of an online forum, which she accessed for advice and support with household finances and utility bills:

> And then in summer they do a money saving, someone will add saying 'have you checked, are you on the best tariff, gas and electric wise?', and then normally that person would give them a link to Money Saving Expert or one of

> *these Daily Mail tools and whatever, and they can go and check.* (Holly, householder)

Opportune moments to target EAS were not only linked to seasonal changes in thermal comfort and energy usage and costs; monthly cycles around pay periods were also discussed with the window just after a pay date seen to be particularly opportunistic:

> *I think prompt is after payday when you see all of the bills going out and you think right that could probably be less.* (Arthur, energy advisor)

What these examples point to are times when energy usage and energy costs are perhaps more distinguished, and the challenges associated with them more harshly felt. There is overlap here and a need for more in-depth consideration across the different temporal dimensions of energy vulnerability and the effectiveness of EAS, as noted throughout these sections. Time as a resource, the pace of telling and responding to problems, the timeline of energy-problems, and the time of month or year in which experiences are situated all factor in how effectiveness is understood in the context of energy-related advice and support.

7.2.2 Introducing the spatiality of effectiveness

The previous sections have focused on the *situatedness* of energy-related advice by exploring the relationship between effectiveness and time. The following section now considers this in terms of place or spatiality as a factor in understanding what shapes or hinders the effectiveness of EAS. As stated in the fourth tenet of Goldsmith's (2004) CMoA, *how* advice is given contributes to its perceived helpfulness, sensitivity, and supportiveness; this necessarily draws attention to the places in which EAS is experienced and the different methods for delivery.

Across the interviews, while the case for some places enabling more effective support than others was made, no one place (or method of delivering support attached to a place) was considered definitively better than others. The interviewees consistently relayed the view that it was about what was effective for that person in that situation. Again, this speaks to the view that in advice and support broadly, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Dealing with people and complex social problems requires flexibility and often creativity. In policy design and practical delivery of schemes, an awareness of this should remain central. However, as will be discussed in the following sections, some key elements of how effectiveness was understood spatially will be drawn out.

The value of face-to-face and in the home

Face-to-face provision was the main way in which the energy advisors supported their clients, and was the preferred method of delivery, occurring mostly in the offices where the service was based. However, off-site face-to-face provision was also a common element of the energy advisor's work and enabled service delivery across much broader geographical areas. For some, this was considered essential in reaching the most complex and vulnerable cases and was described in terms of reaching the hardest-to-reach (Ambrose *et al.*, 2019). This localised nature of EAS, described as reaching out to where people are and being present in a range of their everyday settings, was deemed critical to the advisor being able to deliver their role effectively. Key examples included community centres, supermarkets, children's centres, and health settings such as GP surgeries. The importance of local, physical, face-to-face support in 'other' mundane or everyday spaces has been highlighted across research in this area (Sunderland, 2017; Martiskainen, Heiskanen & Speciale, 2018).

Qualitative research exploring the difference between face-to-face and telephone advice has highlighted that, with the former, familiarity, knowledge, relationships, and

cultural awareness in a local sense all contribute toward more effective provision (Burton, 2020). Despite this, advice delivered exclusively by telephone has been "promoted by government as more convenient and accessible" with a "resulting push towards telephone-only provision" (Burton, 2020, p.341). As such, there is a concern in the advice sector, which is increasingly under threat as a result of technological advances and funding cuts (Burton, 2020), of an expansion in remote methods of delivery, which are deemed less costly, but risk provision that is less nuanced, embedded in local knowledge, responsive, and ultimately, effective in supporting people. Given lockdown measures introduced in response to the COVID-19 crisis in 2020, and a consequent rise in remote working for many, including advisors, considerations of and debates relating to the risks and benefits of providing or not providing advice and support face-to-face (including in people's homes) will likely receive much attention.

Making the case to funders for the value of face-to-face advice has been recognised as a key challenge (Stewart, 2018); as such, the evidence detailed here and elsewhere in the literature cited is essential in adding weight to that case going forward. Interestingly, in terms of evidence that may speak directly to funders with regards to the costs associated with delivery of energy advice and support, one of the energy advisors described how home visits resulted in fewer cancellations, thus greater efficiency in delivery:

> *I think people are probably more relaxed in their own homes. There's also less cancellations, absences, even in the Sure Start, so if people have to come into town, even if it's something they need to do to get advice about, then sometimes they can't get in or whatever. I think that's why we do it.* (Arthur, energy advisor)

Further, in face-to-face provision, not exclusively but including home visits, practical challenges were overcome that could not be resolved or addressed if giving advice and support over the phone:

…we can't do a lot of the work on the phone that we would face-to-face. So, in an appointment, face-to-face, I would get all of this information from them and then I would contact the supplier, provide them with a meter reading, if we have one, with the client giving me data protection and consent, giving me permission to act on their behalf on the phone, so…it's actually a lot faster than sending the consent form through in an email or a fax and waiting for them to respond. So, I would contact the supplier, put them on the Priority Service Register, check the tariff, see if we can get them a better deal, find out how much the arrears are, set up a payment plan. Whereas, on the phone you don't do any of that because you haven't got consent yet. (Phoebe, energy advisor)

As well as communicating pressures relating to time and service demand, the energy advisors discussed an awareness of pressure in terms of protecting the provision of face-to-face EAS, especially that which is delivered to some clients in the home, regarded as "a necessary service for certain householders" (see Stewart, 2018). In the present research, this was explained through a number of stories of clients helped in the past and how being in the home had enabled them to solve a particular energy-related problem or identify a certain issue, which they may have otherwise missed. Simple yet of significant relevance to an energy advisor, one of the main benefits of the home visit was that they enabled the advisor to establish a general sense of thermal comfort and heating practices:

Um people are scared of putting the heating on so they'll have one standalone gas heater in the living room and that will be what they use so the rest of the

house is freezing. Or some of them have their thermostat right up 30, you know 30, and then it's kind of hard to say turn it down a little bit. (Annabelle, energy advisor)

Having 'eyes in the home', as referred to by Fraze *et al.* (2019), allows for the situation to be assessed in an enhanced way, in the context where it is experienced, and beyond that which may or may not be communicated verbally. For instance, in exploring aspects of safety, cleanliness, support systems, and social needs. In this way, the home visit enables a much more holistic and unrestrictive form of communicating vulnerability, energy-related and otherwise.

Advice and support in the home is not only beneficial in terms of how the space itself may communicate elements of at times undisclosed energy-related vulnerabilities; it was also described as a space in which EAS was considered 'easier' (and more effective) because of how we feel at home and the positive consequences of that. As Bella described:

> **Interviewer (Danielle):** And how does this impact you, your work?
>
> **Bella (energy advisor):** *People are better when they are at home for starters, they are better when…when I say better, I mean that they are more open, and so they tell you a lot more, often useful information if you can just make people feel a bit more relaxed. So, when you go to their house that's the easy one. And also, a lot of people can't get out because of money or because they might be disabled so you can say we will come and see you and we will help you.*

While it might be reasonable to expect that home for many experiencing energy vulnerability is a not a space of calm or relaxation, and this could mean that inviting someone into the home is avoided, unwanted or even distressing (Age UK, 2014), this

was not noted by any of the interviewees. There were no examples of clients refusing home visits or discussion of EAS in the home in a negative manner. In fact, the narratives of supporting people in the home were the most positive examples shared. Relating to the discussion in the previous section, this form of provision enabled them to avoid a frustrating aspect of their day-to-day work: feeling a need to rush the telling of stories in communicating energy vulnerability:

> …*they tell you about their family and I think that's what I quite liked about this element of the work and well, because you can give time to those conversations and you wouldn't normally have that time if they came to see you at an outreach… So, that's a different kind of interaction if you're in somebody's home.* (Annabelle, energy advisor)

Lastly, face-to-face provision, at times in the home, was seen to provide some level of additional protection for those who risk being 'left behind' or locked out as the way in which we live with, use and pay for energy changes. This is critical in the current context as efforts towards achieving the UK's Net Zero ambition ramp up, and with it a rapid change towards technological solutions and digitisation across the sector. In response, commentators have called to ensure fairness, justice, and the lives of the most vulnerable households remain central (Citizens Advice, 2020; Robins, 2020). Taking concerns surrounding digital exclusion (see for example, Deller & Waddams, 2015), often remote advice and support provision cannot identify instances where confidence and capability are not disclosed. As Phoebe's experience below highlights, someone confirming they have a smart device is not the same as understanding the extent to which they can comfortably and confidently use it in response to an energy-related problem:

Although there are other ways you can top up now like on your phone or online or whatever. Clients can't always do that like some of my clients can't use the phone some, some of them that's why they can't contact the suppliers. Some of them can't use and don't even have a smartphone or do and don't want to use it. I had a client the other week and he couldn't even turn the torch off on his phone it had been on for 3 weeks! And it seems like that when they're [energy suppliers] saying you can vend a meter you have a smartphone and it's like, well he couldn't turn his torch off so no he can't vend a meter. (Phoebe, energy advisor)

What is critical here and in the experiences of other interviewees is that, as Phoebe highlights, there is often a lack of knowledge or awareness at play in the experience and escalation of a problem, including those that are energy related. Seemingly minor examples of lack of knowledge of energy regulation and process resulted in significant issues, leading to debt, bailiff action, mental distress, informal borrowing from family and friends, going without other essentials, and ultimately intervention from other actors, such as the Energy Ombudsman. Phoebe's client, Elizabeth and others cannot be held responsible for problems caused by things they do not know. If there is no awareness of a problem or an existing situation seems normal to a householder, they are unable to communicate this as part of their experience of vulnerability, energy related or otherwise. This presents a challenge in the provision of effective advice and support, but one that face-to-face provision, as the data suggests here, has the potential to overcome.

This in some way also serves to further highlight the importance of the discussion in Chapter Five, where it was argued that the way in which people talk about and frame their problems around their experiences of everyday life is critical to initiate and

provide effective, meaningful forms of support. We must and can only really start from the accounts of lived experience, the stories being told by the individuals being supported, while drawing on other often non-verbal and spatially situated cues such as a cold home, use of a broken heater in a single room, or a mobile phone torchlight left on. Face-to-face advice and support, in these cases, is essential.

Creating informality

While narratives of place in terms of effective EAS were predominantly focused on the value of face-to-face provision, particularly that provided in the home and often in response to the most complex or vulnerable circumstances, another aspect of spatiality was highlighted and is worth briefly mentioning here. This centred on the capacity to create a sense of informality in the experience of energy advice and support. This related to dress and manner but was also bound up in place. As Bella described:

> *I think it's good to be informal as well. I would rather a client come and see me at [office] - have you seen [office] yet? And so, I do some appointments there and then I do [outreach in community centre] every other week as well and then I don't really do any here, but the other guys do. But I would rather have, I would rather see a client at [office] than here because here is a bit more formal and it feels different, the area does. And it's not [the organisation's] fault. So, I try and dress a little bit dressed down, more informal, I try not to dress very smart - because I think that's not very, that's not what the client wants they just want to see a normal person not someone in a suit or whatever.* (Bella, energy advisor)

Here, Bella refers to a preference for working in a different office to the main one based in the city centre, as well as other community outreach centres. Like other energy advisors, Bella described these places as older, more worn down and less polished,

but places that she believed to be preferable to clients. They were regarded as places that fostered more effective and meaningful interaction, and in this way, these findings suggest that informality is a critical factor in delivering effective EAS. This has some links to earlier discussions around mistrust of formal authoritative sources and spaces (see Chapter Two). In considering the fourth question guiding this research, which seeks to better understand the relationship between formal energy advice and support and the arguably less well understood, more hidden elements of informal support, this illustrates a key factor. While formalised energy-related training, expertise and knowledge is required and expected, in the places we experience advice and support a sense of informality is desirable.

7.3 The importance of communication

Communicating vulnerability, more specifically energy vulnerability as is the focus here, was described as being extremely challenging. The energy advisors, in detailing their professional experiences, explained that this was not only in reference to the way in which householders communicated their own experiences, but also with reference to how they as advisors and other actors communicated solutions and strategies as part of providing support. This also included reference to the ways in which policy and practice in a more abstract and detached sense communicates with people, for example in the labels given to benefits or grants, and how that impacts ways of communicating with one another.

The main way in which communication between advisor and recipient was perceived to be hindered related to the complexity and unfamiliarity in the terminology used with regard to two things: income from benefits and energy billing. Considering one of the three key drivers of fuel poverty being low incomes, a significant proportion of the

energy advisors work involved activity related to maximising income through social security benefits. This involved, for example, doing 'benefits checks' (mentioned extensively), challenging award decisions, and making new claims. As Phoebe's earlier quote highlighted, individuals often did not know the specific label or term given to their income, and this has implications for the course of advice action: "*…because generally people don't know what income they are receiving…And that massively changes the advice that we are giving*" (Phoebe energy advisor).

A number of the advisors echoed similar frustrations, and this was predominantly an issue in the presence or absence of a health condition or disability and the implications of this for entitlement and eligibility. The general position of the energy advisors was that identifying receipt or entitlement to health or disability related benefits was particularly important as this often opened up access to other forms of support, financial and otherwise. In the energy advisors' accounts, one benefit was mentioned more than any other: severe disability premium.

> *…the biggest thing that we check for is severe disability premium - so closely linked with health then. A lot of people we see have health problems and so if you've got a particular rate of DLA or PIP or any rate of AA, and no carer and you live on your own…. So, I always check with that because they also back date it to when you're entitled to it so a big chunk.* (Bella, energy advisor)

> *Well, they don't know what they're doing. I had someone there, he was about 70, maybe older, and I was telling him how you can get severe disability premium on your pension credit, and it's quite substantial but he hasn't been getting it, and you just need to phone them up and say, 'are you getting this disability premium?', but he couldn't really understand what that meant, because those three words don't mean anything to him. It's just confusing,*

instantly confusing and anything related to law or benefits of regulations makes people just switch off. (Andrew, energy advisor)

As Andrew states, "those three words don't mean anything to him" yet having access to this information is critical for the type of support that might be suggested or given, particularly where increasing incomes will, to some extent, alleviate the negative impacts and experiences of energy vulnerability. In the case of severe disability premium, paid to households with health issues and disabilities and typically in lieu of formal care arrangements, this equates to nearly £3,500 of unclaimed income per year (Turn2Us, 2020) – more than ten times the average fuel poverty gap, which is what the UK Government suggest is the amount an energy bill would need to reduce by in order for a fuel poor household to be no longer experiencing fuel poverty (BEIS, 2020). As the advisors explained, however, confusing terminology used for benefits income is not only a hindrance to the effectiveness of EAS in terms of causing confusion or locking people out of entitlement, but it also brings about a sense of disengagement.

The language of energy was similarly regarded as problematic. Celeste, one of the households interviewed, referred in detail to, what she considered to be, unnecessary complexity in the language used in relation to energy, and resultingly her frustrations around trying to switch supplier independently:

…make it easier for people to change their flippin gas and electricity. I'd be happy to pay someone to sort mine out, it's that bad now. Please just speak English. Don't make it impossible. (Celeste, householder)

There was a similar sense with Celeste's experience that ultimately issues with communication, here in relation to energy, not benefits, led to disengagement. However, in telling her story, Celeste presented herself as a proactive person, seeking

advice and support from her family and online sources, and doing so independently. As with Martha and a decade of keeping the prepayment meter despite an awareness that she was paying more for energy than she needed to, Celeste had 'given up' in efforts to switch supplier, in this case, for twelve years:

> *I did look on Money Saving Expert, because normally that's like my go to place for when I can't sort anything out and I need good advice. And, my Dad said there was something good on there, some good advice. It's just that probably within a minute of it, it's all this kilowatts and all this kind of thing and I just thought, 'oh no I just give up on this' and that was it then. So, still on the to do list, twelve years on.* (Celeste, householder)

Interestingly, in asking the energy advisors about what made EAS effective or not, another key factor related to communication is the need to recognise that communicating energy vulnerability often does not begin by talking about energy. Therefore, there is some expectation that energy advisors, particularly those working to alleviate vulnerability in the context of energy market advice around switching, affordability and debt, will also need to be able to adopt a language of benefits, housing, employment issues, as well as the language of energy. People's experiences of energy vulnerability and the need for energy advice and support are complex, interwoven with multiple other issues, and extend far beyond a focus on affordability, as Henri highlighted:

> *I've got a client who is in a three-bed house and he's the only person there, so obviously he's got bedroom tax, he's got rent arrears so he can't even move, they won't let him move into social housing, he is on job seekers allowance but he's not well man. He's gone from, his ESA stopped because he failed a medical, so then was out on job seekers allowance, which was reduced down*

to £72, plus he has deductions coming off that. And then he has to pay bedroom tax and try to top up a PPM for a three-bedroom house. And he has a very difficult son who he's giving money to go and top up for him and his son's gone off with the money. So, he's sat in the dark with no gas or electric. There's always, sometimes it is that they just don't have enough money but there's so many other factors, it's very, very difficult. Where do you begin? (Henri, energy advisor)

Another way in which communication was seen to hinder the effectiveness of EAS relates to number of times we expect householders to (re)tell their stories of hardship. As Luke and Celeste's experience illustrate, the expectation with regards to repeatedly retelling and the worries and pressures associated with that is sufficiently discouraging to put people off seeking advice or follow signposting:

…like I've said, even if I was going without electric for like a week or two because I wasn't seeing anyone else, because I was embarrassed to tell them my story again, of my same situation, again, Danielle. So, I would wait. (Luke, householder)

The main thing was, when they sent that form, they sent me a letter stating that before you fill the form in, we would advise you to go to a Citizens Advice, and other advice places. And I kind of went, 'oh I have to explain to another person first, and I have to go'... So, it kind of, anxiety took over. And then after a couple of months, I went to see my counselling and they kind of started saying, 'what's going on?' (Celeste, householder)

These examples highlight the importance of efforts to reduce and avoid preventable demand on advice services, as discussed in the previous section. Both the energy

advisors and householder shared numerous accounts of the need to repeatedly disclose and describe energy problems and related circumstances. While this is cumbersome and inefficient in terms of taking up valuable time and resource across a number of schemes and services, what the quotes here highlight is that it also has significant negative impacts on the health and wellbeing of those in need of advice and support.

The energy advisors also discussed what they believed effective communication entailed in terms of communicating with a householder or client of the service, and how this related more broadly to the effectiveness of the advice and support they were providing. The overall approach described by the energy advisors can be understood in relation to the fourth tenet of the CMoA (Goldsmith, 2004), where sensitivity, helpfulness, and supportiveness were key features. Sensitivity was particularly important, for example (and linking to the discussion in the last section), in terms of allowing space and time for stories to be told in a relaxed, friendly, compassionate and genuine manner.

Interestingly, beyond this, an additional element of effectiveness in the energy advisor's style of communication related to transparency in the line of questioning when gathering information from the client. Explaining why they were asking the questions they were of clients was noted as critical in their approach:

> *…explaining to people that you are going to get this information so that you can help them. Then people will open up a lot more to you because you're only asking for them, not just being nosey. I always explain to them why I am asking certain questions. So, for example if I'm asking about their health problems, some people are a bit funny about that, I always say, I just want to know, I just need to know if you've got any health problems because if we are applying to*

one of the trust funds, that might be one of the options available to you. Some of the trust funds will only help if you've got health conditions… Or do we need to be aware that you, for example if you can't have a prepayment meter because you have nebuliser then, you can't because if you self-disconnect then you can't use the nebuliser. So, it's important basically, that's what I explain and that's why I am asking these questions. (Phoebe, energy advisor)

In contrast to narratives of where communication was effective and this enabled more effective EAS, the energy advisors and householders also discussed at length the implications of poor communication. Numerous examples of interactions with the energy supplier customer contact centres were put forward in evidencing examples of poor communication.

…if it was just the general line like the clients have, I think we would really struggle, the struggles with customer service. And they have targets - energy companies - to get money back, because that's their job like any customer service job is to recover debt or set up payment plans, and they have targets to meet. So, with that in mind a lot of clients they do struggle because they kind of can't meet the criteria of that person who they are speaking to on the phone and then they don't get help at all. So, they're screwed basically. (Phoebe, energy advisor)

…. if you have somebody in that position who is obviously so vulnerable and they're not listening to you as a support worker, at the agency contact centre bit, and you have to push it further is just…how are you supposed to as somebody trying to sort your own stuff out? (Annabelle, energy advisor)

7.4 The role of emotions

Conveyed in the stories shared by the interviewees, EAS is not only understood in practical or informational terms but is also experienced as distinctly emotional. As discussed in Chapter Six, with reference to the role of antagonists, interviewees described their past experiences as involving a range of emotions, such as feeling fearful, let down, distraught, unsupported, and disgusted. The role of emotions, as the study by Longhurst and Hargreaves (2019) has highlighted, play a crucial role not only in the experiences of energy use and vulnerability, but also in terms of how certain emotions can facilitate or prevent meaningful engagement with advice and support. Like the interviewees' experiences detailed in Longhurst and Hargreaves (2019) study, typical emotions noted by the interviewees in this study included fear, worry, care, embarrassment, stigma, and trust, as well as confidence, calmness, a sense of authority, and the feeling of satisfaction associated with learning as a result of EAS.

One emotion that came across strongly in relation to the experiences of energy vulnerability and the impact of receiving support was loneliness. The detriment of social isolation as a consequence and risk factor in the context of fuel poverty has been widely documented (see for example Hills, 2011; Thompson & Snell, 2013; Baker, Mould & Restrick, 2018). Twelve of the 18 householders interviewed lived alone and many noted that their experiences of advice and support in relation to an energy problem had provided the opportunity simply to talk to someone, which, as Michael described, evoked feelings of care and compassion:

> *It was just great to speak to somebody like I am speaking to you now. This helps me. Because it makes me feel like someone cares and I then feel positive.*

> *And that can make me, it makes me feel good that someone would listen.*
> (Michael, householder)

This ties closely with the discussion earlier in the chapter around the pressures felt with regards to time and the difficulty energy advisors have in balancing this with a desire to allow people to take the time needed to communicate their vulnerability, to tell their story in full. Relating also to instances of poor communication, *feeling* as though you were being listened to distinguished actors considered to be supportive, such as allies and peers, from those felt to be unsupportive, antagonists.

Emotional states in relation to energy problems, such as affordability or dealing with an energy debt, were also described as major factors in whether or not a person might be in a place to engage with and act upon the advice and support provided. Here, another dimension to understanding what characterises 'opportunistic' moments in the context of EAS can be noted; here, in relation to whether or not a person feels that they are in an appropriate emotional state or frame of mind to seek out, engage with, or act upon advice and support. As Elizabeth noted, for her a house move was not an opportunistic moment due to emotional strains at that time: "*Yeah, it's having the clarity and focus to be able to think and I wasn't able to do that when I first moved into this house*" (Elizabeth, householder). Similarly, and as noted elsewhere in relation to switching from typically more expensive prepayment meters, emotions played a powerful role in rationalising inaction:

> *I have tried to say to people it's exactly the same, yes prepayment is like paying for it before you use it, but the thing is you can still do the same thing, you can still put that money aside and then you're paying for it as you go along and you can just well…you know they're just scared; they are scared of that big bill.*
> (Annabelle, energy advisor)

Emotions were also factored into decision making processes regarding where to turn to when needing EAS. This was the case with experiences of informal advice and support, where, as Jean highlighted, a potential for relatives to experience emotional distress played a role in selecting appropriate sources to turn to. In this case, friends were regarded as better equipped emotionally than Jean's mother, and this was partially linked to them being perceived as having greater capacity to respond:

With my friends, yeah, with my friends especially. I don't like telling my Mum because she obviously she is your Mum, and she gets stressed and everything. She knows what I'm going through but I kind of hide things from, keep things from her. Because sometimes my things is not, well she doesn't know how to deal with it then. (Jean, householder)

Other informal experiences of advice and support were discussed in relation to online forums and how the emotional impacts from the advice given could be enough to disengage a person form seeking support elsewhere, entering, as discussed earlier in the chapter, a period of hidden coping. Jess described how at times of crisis, emotional resilience is likely to be limited or strained and, in her view, with the anonymity of informal advice online comes the space to be harsher, more direct or opiniated. As she explained:

I was going to say, even though it's anonymous, sometimes if someone is low enough that might be enough to drive someone from asking advice and pretty much giving up on the whole thing and just thinking 'oh well, sod it, what can I do to change my situation?' (Jess, householder)

Turning back to understandings of what makes formalised EAS effective, the energy advisors noted that emotion, or a stripping out of emotion, often played a key role in

resolving energy-related problems. This draws on the third assumption of Goldsmith's (2004) model, that considers effective advice and support as *rhetorical* – meaning that it aims to achieve some purpose in a social context. Specifically, in the analysis here, the energy advisors described how they were better placed to 'fix' an energy-related problem, not necessarily because they had more energy know-how or were more energy literate, but because they were able to approach a problem emotion-free or far less emotionally strained than a client. As Henri described:

> *I feel more comfortable being forceful with whoever I am on the phone to because I I'm not representing myself, I'm representing someone else so I feel like it can be, not cheekier, but just more…it's like I'm trying to get the best possible scenario for that client, so I don't have to feel guilty or weird or bad about that, or like I'm being cheeky, but if I was ringing up an energy company myself I think I feel more timid. Whereas because I'm representing someone else maybe I can be a little bit more aggressive than the client would be willing to be themselves.* (Henri, energy advisor)

The householders echoed this sentiment, with Charles characterising the ideal emotional state for effectively dealing with energy-related problems as one that is 'calm' and 'measured', speaking from a position of 'knowledge and authority':

> *…as I say, they are dealing purely with information, with people's rights, and they are speaking from a position of knowledge and authority, so, as I say, they are not directly emotionally involved. I mean, they are emotionally involved in terms of care, but they tend to, and it's very illuminating learning from people like [advisor] from [organisation], on how to talk to these people. it is a simple case of having the confidence to know what your rights are and being able to speak to them from that calm, measured position. That's actually been quite a*

learning experience. That stood me in good stead actually. When it's something and I've had to talk to people, you know, off my own back, I've taken a leaf out of their book as it were. (Charles, householder)

Later in the interview, Charles returned to this discussion, sharing an experience from some time after his support from the energy advice service where he had gone on to resolve an energy-related problem independently. This was, in his words, specifically a result of the 'feeling of learning' he had experienced with regard to an effective emotional approach:

I was studying the bill very carefully, and then I read my own meter and I thought 'aha, they have vastly overestimated my usage. So, you know, learning from [energy advisor] how to deal with people in a calm and rational way. I phone them up, and fortunately I spoke to a person who was very friendly. I explained my situation, like I say very calmly, and I made this person know that I was in possession of the right information, regarding my usage, my average usage, and spoke to them… I actually got something done and they promised to send me out a new bill. And I've actually paid it…they overestimated more than twice, three times my usage actually. So, as I said, that feeling of learning from [energy advisor], rather than panic and think 'oh what am I gonna do about this', you arm yourself with the information, measure what you're going to say in a calm and rational manner, and with information you have authority. (Charles, householder)

There are clear questions marks around the extent to which it is right or fair for householders – as advice recipients and energy customers – to be regulating or managing their emotions in order to alleviate energy vulnerability and find a resolution to crisis and hardship - in other words as a mechanism for maximising the

effectiveness of the support they receive, especially when this relates to support from their energy providers. However, Charles' experience does demonstrate the positive and long-lasting impact effective advice and support can have. In this case, centred on feelings of confidence as a result of being able to mirror what Charles referred to as the calm and measured approach taken by the energy advisor. Reiterating the opening of this section, Charles' experience, and those of other interviewees, clearly demonstrate the significance of the practical, informational and emotional aspects of alleviating energy vulnerability.

7.5 Effectiveness is elusive

The previous sections have explored a number of factors identified in the analysis that were described in terms of having the capacity to shape or hinder the effectiveness of EAS, relating to temporality, spatiality, communication, and the role of emotions. However, in addition to the interviewees' interpretations of what factors shaped or hindered perceived effectiveness, there was a more overarching dimension to narratives in this area. This related to a broader understanding of what *effectiveness* means in the context of energy vulnerability and related advice and support, how this can vary at different levels and by different actors, for example in policy or to service and scheme funders, and how the implications of this result in different approaches to evaluating or measuring success. Interestingly here, as will be discussed, for the energy advisors, effectiveness was something largely assumed. Whether their work constituted good of effective energy-related advice and support was unknown in the absence of feedback, regarded by them, under the pressure of service demand and limited time and resources, as an element of best, not standard practice.

Considering one of the three assumptions underlying what constitutes effectiveness set out in the beginning of this chapter, Goldsmith (2004) notes that effective advice and support should be 'meaningful'. However, this poses key questions, such as meaningful for whom, and how do we assess the extent to which EAS is meaningful or effective? As Snell *et al.* (2018) point out, in relation to energy efficiency schemes, evaluating effectiveness has dominantly resembled a "numbers game" where "evidence gathering is reduced to aggregate quantification of measures installed rather than the qualitative impact on people's lives" (p.7). Drawing similar conclusions, Sherriff *et al.* (2019) refer to this as dealing with "messy metrics". Adding to this and pointing to a limitation in approaches adopting a narrower focus, for instance with energy efficiency, Middlemiss (2017) notes that: "Certainly, from a lived experience perspective, gains in energy efficiency can easily be overshadowed by changing welfare policy and energy prices (Middlemiss and Gillard, 2015)" (p.20). As such, commonplace evaluation approaches to assessing the effectiveness of schemes or services may be regarded as ineffective on narrow metrics, yet wider or more personalised benefits are felt but not captured, and vice versa.

As well as examining what is meaningful and to whom, Goldsmith's (2004) notion of 'rhetorical' – where effective advice and support is that which is focused on achieving "some purpose in a particular social context" (p.45) – is again central here. In current discourse, there has been a dominance of focus on the 'purpose' as defined by policy and practice, for example, in measuring number of households reached, encouraged to switch, or value of debt wiped – "messy metrics" (Sherriff *et al.*, 2019) that are part of the "numbers game" (Snell *et al.*, 2018, p.7) as noted above. Rooted in the technical-rational models discussed in Chapter Two, observable and measurable changes in household behaviour or circumstances are therefore commonly understood as

indicators that EAS has been effective. However, several of the energy advisors noted how the absence of action was not the absence of decision-making, and how inaction as a choice was often perceived by householders to be the least risky option. In such cases, EAS, from the householder's point of view, may be considered especially effective in that they were left making a more informed decision that suited their circumstances, but one which is unlikely to be recorded in metrics. In Andrew's words: "*…and do nothing is an option as well*" (Andrew, energy advisor)

The energy advisors talked extensively about switching as a particularly common example in their work where clients decided not to act. The act of 'switching' supplier, tariff or payment method has received a considerable amount of attention in policy and research (BEIS, 2017; Deller *et al.*, 2017; Walsh, Groth & Wiedmann, 2005). Indeed, there are entire online platforms and national campaigns targeted wholly or primarily at encouraging consumers to switch (for example, Big Energy Saving Week). Yet, regulatory action (e.g., the energy price cap) and extensive research evidence acknowledges that many households do not switch and therefore continue to pay more for their energy than they need to (BEIS, 2017). The data here similarly reflected this tension between policy and campaign pushes versus personal experiences of problems. Describing the experiences of her clients, Annabelle explained how effectiveness for many clients may be about "acknowledging where they are coming from" not what they do or do not action as a result of EAS:

> *I think it's just acknowledging where they're coming from in that they want security of knowing who the company is and then but asking them about why they are so good you know what it is…what is it that's fostered this sense of attachment to them. And often they can't tell you properly, even having had problems with them, so it's just kind of looking at here, looking at it from both*

sides and some people still won't. They won't even think about it. But also, some people they've heard stories from people about switching when it goes horribly wrong which is quite a big thing. (Annabelle, energy advisor)

Engaging with in-depth narrative accounts allows research to unpack some of the reasons behind inaction and resistance. With regards to reasons or drivers for not switching, a range of reasons were presented, which includes many points discussed elsewhere in the findings chapter, such as avoiding hassle, prioritising other problems, issues with trust, convenience and a lack of knowledge. With regards to convenience and the experience of dealing with energy problems in a web of other issues, Elizabeth and Andrew shared the following reflections:

Because I had everything with [supplier], I had my energy, I had a mobile, I had home phone, broadband, pretty much everything that you can get with UW, I had it. And it was easy because it was just one bill and I didn't have to think about it" (Elizabeth, householder)

It's difficult to know what the motivation is for our clients, because they're so up in the air, lots of different problems going on. So, generally even things that are boring but, you know, we all need to do them are things that might be overwhelming. I think that, part of me thinks that's maybe why people neglect to switch or look up the different rules, not because of competence, because there's so many other stresses in their lives. Maybe that's why. (Arthur, energy advisor)

Another key issue in existing frames for understanding effectiveness conveyed by the energy advisors related to the role of feedback and the importance of follow up beyond the advice interaction. Energy advisors simply did not know if the work they were doing

was effective or not, another way in which the interviewees' accounts illustrated the elusiveness of 'effectiveness' in energy-related advice and support. As such, they described that underlining their day-to-day approach to the work they did involve a sense of carry on until told otherwise:

> *But then how often they actually action that, I don't know?!* (Arthur, energy advisor)

> *And you can chase them and chase them, and some people just don't get back in touch. You just keep doing what you do.* (Phoebe, energy advisor)

> *…you don't know until they come back with the next problem and quite often you find that perhaps the advice hasn't been followed and it's just it's very, very difficult.* (Andrew, energy advisor)

In Boardman and Darby's (2000) study examining the factors and characteristics of effective energy advice for low income and vulnerable households, two of the 20 recommendations are worth noting here. Firstly, it was stated that "advice without follow up cannot be confirmed as effective advice" (Boardman and Darby, 2000, p.56) and secondly, that, "follow-up should become a normal part of energy advice practice, as it is now a part of best practice, whether the advice has been given on unit cost issues or on measures and their use. This is to confirm that the advice has been effective, and the householder has benefited" (p.57). As the review of the extant literature set out in this thesis and the data presented in this chapter suggests, it seems that follow-up is still not a normal part of practice.

In the experiences shared by the energy advisors and householders, there was little to no evidence of feedback being part of the process of energy advice, at least not part of the everyday practice that they were aware of. Henri noted that he believed

evaluations of the service happened but that he did not have any awareness of key findings or reflections that would be of relevance to his professional practice, and the effectiveness of the EAS he provided. Where this did happen, it was rare and on much more of an informal basis, as Annabelle stated:

> *Sometimes yes people will sort of phone you up an say I've had good news with this and that's nice It's nice when people do that because you don't see the end of things. And sometimes just calling to say thank you.* (Annabelle, energy advisor)

Instance of feedback and follow up were also evident in informal interactions online, as Jess noted:

> *Yeah, quite a lot, more so on MSE but yeah, yeah. You'll find often if somebody has helped you, they will often, people are quite kind like they might come back and say 'ah, how did you get on with that?' or people might private message you to give you some further advice or say things they didn't necessarily want to say quite so publicly.* (Jess, householder)

Time pressure is likely to play a critical role here, where informal instances of EAS are less pressurised than those described in the formalised energy advice setting, therefore there was time to reflect on the advice and support given and seek feedback through a follow up. In efforts to reduced time pressures in formalised energy advice provision, then, is likely to provide more opportunities for energy advisors and energy advice services to introduce, as recommended in 2000 by Boardman and Darby, consistent and meaningful mechanisms for understanding and evaluating the effectiveness of their work. Again here, the distinction between EAS that is reactive (time pressured, controlled conversations, responding to crisis, narrower in focus and

suggested action, more emotional) and that which is proactive (less time pressured, able to allow unfolding of stories, working to alleviate hidden coping, more holistic, less emotional) can be noted.

7.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter has explored several factors identified in the analysis that centred on the interviewees' perceptions as to what shapes or hinders the effectiveness of EAS. Relating to the third and fourth research questions, these factors illustrated the importance of temporality, spatiality, communication, and the role of emotions. The chapter returned to Goldsmith's (2004) CMoA, specifically three assumptions that described effective support as that which is *meaningful, situated,* and *rhetorical.*

Drawing on the importance of time and place first, the narrative accounts shared by the energy advisors and the householder highlighted how communicating energy vulnerability is time-sensitive and requires patience; the unfolding of stories is personal and emotional, and made easier where informality in the environment, whether a formalised setting or in the home, is found. However, demand on the service and related time pressures leave the energy advisors in difficult situations, resulting in techniques such as 'controlling the conversation' in order to strike a balance between advice and support which if effective in practical, informational and emotional terms.

As well as enabling the space and time for narratives of energy vulnerability to be shared, communication was also considered to be critical in terms of the terminology used, specifically around benefits and energy. The interviewees also suggested a need for advisors to be able to adopt the language of not only energy experiences, policy and regulation, but also that of housing, benefits, employment, and other common problem areas to be effective. Another key determinant of effectiveness, as

articulated by the interviewees, was the role of emotions. As noted, energy-related advice and support is not only understood in practical or informational terms but is also experienced as something which is distinctly emotional. This, alongside other related findings, contributes to the existing literature in providing an in-depth understanding of what characterises 'opportunistic' in the context of effective energy advice and support.

The focus in the chapter then turned towards an overarching perspective presented by the interviewees, chiefly the energy advisors, in relation to the notion of effectiveness being problematic and elusive. A need to balance approaches towards measuring and understanding effectiveness that draw not only on policy or project targets, typically in terms of playing the "numbers game" (Snell *et al.*, 2018) that utilises "messy metrics" (Sherriff *et al.* 2019), but also that which explores the qualitative impact on people's lives – a position argued for here and throughout this thesis.

This chapter brings the discussion of the findings to a close having detailed the role of *problems, people* and *process* in examining how effectiveness is understood in the supporting those with experiences of energy vulnerability. The thesis will now move to the eighth and final chapter summarising the key findings and contributions.

Chapter Eight: Effective Energy Advice and Support: Not Just Paint-by-Numbers

The primary purpose of this research has been to explore the experiences and role of energy-related advice and support in the context of tackling fuel poverty. This represents an important element in a wider package of efforts to alleviate a recognised social problem in the UK (Simcock *et al.*, 2013), however one that has been described as underexplored and undervalued (Boardman, 2016). Further highlighting the importance of research in this field, tackling fuel poverty is also firmly situated within the wider context of the energy policy and research aligned with the UK's commitment to addressing the climate crisis and reaching Net Zero by 2050 (Committee on Fuel Poverty. 2019).

Adopting a qualitative approach to explore the lived experience of energy vulnerability and related advice and support, this research has examined the experiences of providing and receiving such support within and beyond the formal setting of an energy advice service. It fills a gap in the existing evidence base in setting out a bottom-up, in-depth qualitative exploration of energy-related advice and support which is rooted in the views, beliefs and perceptions of those with direct lived experience. It frames advice and support in the context of energy vulnerability as nuanced, flexible, and adaptive. In agreement with Goldsmith (2004), it positions such support as:

> "…not just paint-by-the numbers – it is practical art with situational constraints, styles, and techniques but also with creativity and adaptation" (p.50)

Relatedly, and contributing to a growing body of research examining the role of social relations, a more specific aim has been to uncover the role of the informal, here in the context of energy advice. In addition to this, the research also aimed to generate a

better understanding of the perceptions and key factors considered to shape or hinder how effectiveness is understood in this context. Bringing these overarching aims together to develop a better understanding of the lived experience of energy advice and support, the role of social relations, framings and factors involved in determining effectiveness, and the distinct and interrelated role of informal sources, settings and styles of advice, the research was guided by four research questions:

- How do people experience advice and support for energy-related problems?

- What role do other actors play across formal and informal settings?

- What shapes and hinders effectiveness of energy advice and support across formal and informal settings?

- How is the relationship between the formal and informal in the context of energy-related advice and support understood, and what are the implications for policy and practice?

In concluding the thesis, this chapter will elaborate on some of the key findings and contributions resulting from the research, while highlighting several reflections relating to its limitations, suggestions for further research, and policy implications arising. Responding to identified gaps in the evidence base, the thesis posits several contributions, set out here, that can be situated across the study of fuel poverty, phenomenology, advice, psychology and social policy. Contributions are empirical, methodological, and theoretical in nature, and cut across the findings discussed in Chapters Five, Six and Seven, as well as drawing on the literature in earlier chapters.

In elaborating on these key findings and contributions, the chapter is structured in three parts. The first explores the application of an approach rooted in phenomenological psychology to generate a deeper understanding of how effective

energy-related advice and support is experienced and understood in the context of tackling fuel poverty. It argues that effectiveness is understood in practical, informational and emotional terms, and can be located at the intersection of three areas – *problems*, *people*, and *process* (see Figure 8.1) - which should be given greater prominence in research, policy and practice where effective provision is a central aim.
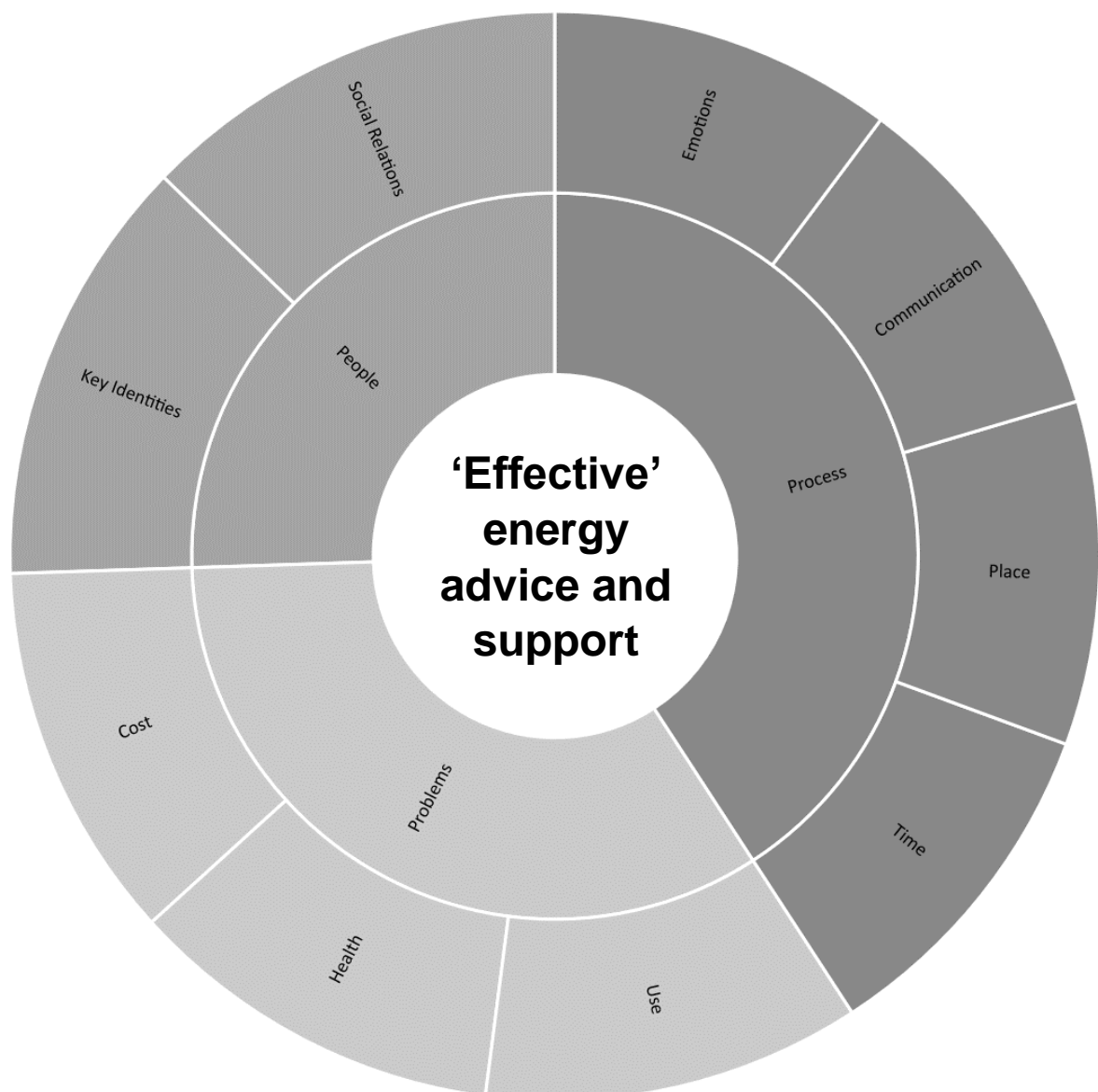

Figure 8.1: Understanding effectiveness at the intersection of problems, people, and process

The second part, moving from somewhat more empirical reflections to those more methodological in nature, draws out the significance in adopting a research approach

that centres on lived experience, specifically in terms of its capacity to access and understand the ways in which policy and practice shape and mediate such experiences (MacIntosh & Wright, 2018). Here, blind spots and limitations in existing policy and practice are brought forward as key elements identified in the analysis of the narrative accounts shared by the interviewees. The third and final part of the chapter turns to discuss a group of findings from the research that can be organised around more theoretical and conceptual contributions. Specifically, this section sets out how engaging with theory has enabled the research to develop a more nuanced understanding in relation to several key areas and concepts, including energy vulnerability (Middlemiss & Gillard, 2015), tellability (Norrick, 2000), characteristics of 'opportunistic' advice (Darby, 1999), and the strengths and limitations in drawing on Bell's (2020) frame of Working Class Environmentalism.

8.1 Framing effectiveness around problems, people, and process: empirical contributions

Understanding what characterises 'effective' energy advice and support has, as Chapter Two highlighted, been the focus of much research, particularly a number of studies evaluating the strengths and successes of various schemes and services. Constituting a central argument in this thesis, such approaches have been said to offer only a limited understanding and one that overlooks interpretative, perceptual and experiential processes, as well as an individual's prior knowledge, and the social, historical and cultural contexts in which advice takes place (see for example Simcock et al., 2013 and Darby, 1999; 2003). As highlighted in Chapter Three, there has been a tendency in research to rely on "methodologically individualised, informational deficit models" (Catney *et al.*, 2013, p.512), such as those found in the discipline of social-cognitive psychology. Detailed in the discussion of the epistemological framework in

Chapter four, this research is in agreement with this critique whereby such approaches are considered to overlook "…the importance of place, space and interaction in shaping human behaviour" (Miller 1992, p. 23). In response, the research detailed in this thesis utilised an approach rooted in phenomenological psychology to go beyond narrow metrics and macro indicators to generate a deeper understanding of how effective energy-related advice and support is experienced and understood in the social policy context of tackling fuel poverty. In doing so, the research findings across Chapters Five, Six and Seven detail how effectiveness is understood in practical, informational and emotional terms, and how it can be located at the intersection of three areas – problems, people, and process. The thesis, in setting out a framework generated from an analysis of lived experience, argues that greater prominence should be given to these dynamic and overlapping dimensions in research, policy and practice where effective provision is a central aim.

The literature on energy advice and advice more broadly has explored in detail issues related to advice resistance, whether in terms of responses to unsolicited advice, that which has implications for 'face threat' (as discussed in Chapter Three), or advice that is not 'client-led' (Darby, 1999). Based on the analysis, this research argues that meaningfully engaging with people begins with an understanding of the types of problems they face, how they navigate such challenges, and whether they wish to be supported, and if so, how. Where energy vulnerability is communicated, it begins with the person and their understanding and prioritisation of the problems faced. Underpinning this argument, the analysis sets outs three dominant 'frames' for energy problems grounded in the interviewees' accounts: paying for energy, energy and health and energy use.

Firstly, with regards to paying for energy, experiences relating to the causes and coping mechanisms of the unaffordability were illustrated through numerous examples of severe issues with debt, but this was principally focused on the debt recovery process. As highlighted in Chapter Five, it was common for the energy advisors to be dealing with energy debts that had been wrongly issued, or where the amount of arrears was later found to be incorrect. As such, the evidence outlined in this research indicates that this is a current area of policy and practice within the energy sector where consumer protection and service are especially poor and is therefore an area in need of review and reform. Bringing to the fore the relationship between the psychological and the experiential, the research further explored the frame of 'paying for energy' to unpick motivating factors in opting to use a more expensive payment method. Worry of the unexpected bill, complexity in arranging alternatives, a greater sense of control, a "ticking down" not building up of costs, and a more hands-off relationship with the energy supplier were all identified factors, adding to the existing understanding of the psychological influences and processes at play. With an element of this drawing out the importance of the supplier-consumer relationship, the value in research exploring social relations in this context, as this research contributes to the wider literature, is demonstrated.

In communicating energy vulnerability, as the title of thesis draws focus to, the findings highlighted that for the interviewees some 'problems' were easier to communicate than others. This supports a key argument underlining the empirical contribution of this thesis, further evidencing a strength in the approach adopted, in terms of highlighting that a starting point in effective energy advice and support involves working with tellable energy problems. A key example in the findings from this study relates to the comparison between communicating energy vulnerability as linked to health or money,

with the former being preferred. Health and wellbeing were central to the household's narratives, and 15 of the 18 householders interviewed disclosed health issues, with many also linking this to increased or insufficient energy use. The research sets out evidence that for many of the interviewees physical and mental health and energy were inextricably linked. It also signifies the important role of health and wellbeing more broadly, not only designing and developing efforts to tackle fuel poverty, but also the way in which positive changes in health and wellbeing are understood as markers of fuel poverty being alleviated, expressed in terms of "essential constituents of lives lived well" (Groves *et al.*, 2017, p.10). For example, in Charles, Luke, and Celeste's experiences, a key marker of improved health corresponded with a return to a more creative past self, with the home now being considered a safer, warmer and healthier space where they could create, not merely survive. This highlights a constituent of a life lived well not previously documented in the literature. In other words, in the design, delivery and evaluation of practical interventions, including energy advice, the evidence here calls for efforts to meaningfully include a health and wellbeing angle, and consider other markers that may be of value but currently omitted. As discussed in Chapter Five, therefore, further research is needed to understand how wider, less common markers of good health and wellbeing, such as self-reported indicators associated with hobbies and habits, might be meaningfully included when assessing effectiveness.

As well as framing the experiences of energy vulnerability around cost and health, the interviewees also drew on the significance of energy use and more specifically made concerted efforts to communicate their positions as thrifty, conservative with energy use, and the implications this had for those providing energy advice. This has particular significance in terms of approaches to tackling fuel poverty that centre on

behavioural change among those experiencing fuel poverty. As noted, there have been calls for research and policy to "adopt an integrated approach in understanding the complex interactions between contextual factors, psychological factors and energy saving behaviour" (Boomsma *et al.*, 2019) as this research does. Noted elsewhere in the thesis, this demonstrates the problematic idea of attempting to fix the fuel poor, not fix the situation of fuel poverty. As this research highlights, households experiencing or living at risk of fuel poverty need systems and structures in place that work to protect and support, not create or exacerbate vulnerabilities in relation to low income or health, for example.

A final point on framing energy problems reiterates the value in going beyond energy costs, billing, and services. This echoes definitional shifts from understanding fuel poverty in terms of costs (i.e., Boardman's 10% indicator) to that which centres on "socially- and materially-necessitated level of energy services in the home" (Buzar, 2007, p.1909). The narrative accounts suggested that a particularly useful frame for meaningfully communicating with households might centre on the presence, absence or general functionality of white goods and other household appliances. Importantly, as highlighted in Arthur's experience with a client in Chapter Five, this may be a less well understood or examined marker of fuel poverty risk, where not having certain essential appliances will necessarily mean lower energy costs but hidden energy vulnerability.

In Chapter Six the focus shifted from problems to people, considering the second research question which asked: *What role do other actors play across formal and informal settings?* In developing a novel typology of key role and relations, the analysis provides a unique contribution that responds to a paucity of knowledge with regards to the role that social relations play in the context of energy demand, vulnerability and

related advice and support (Middlemiss & Gillard, 2015; Middlemiss *et al.*, 2019; Hargreaves & Middlemiss, 2020).

Focusing on the role of others first, the research draws on the use of typologies as set out in narrative enquiry (Riley & Hawe, 2009; McGuire, 2007), to provide a novel contribution to the literature in the form of a typology of social relations in the context of energy problems and related advice and support. The typology presented in this research consists of four characterisations of social relations: experts, allies, antagonists, and peers. Roles were filled by various actors including energy suppliers, landlords, social workers, job centre advisors, friends, relatives, and energy advisors, among others. While certain actors were typically aligned to one type of role more predominantly than others (for example, energy suppliers as antagonists), the analysis highlighted that mapping actors onto roles was not always neat and clear cut. There was a fluidity to the typology, illustrating how perceptions could change because of related advice and support. For instance, where a relationship with a landlord had improved after the installation of a new heating system, consequently changing the type of role they were perceived to assume from antagonist to ally.

The characterisation of antagonist featured most across the narrative accounts and is a role that warrants further exploration, particularly in terms of how the evidence suggested that actors adopting this characterisation might be stymying wider efforts to tackle fuel poverty (e.g., setting debt repayments too high and worsening household debt). As Chapter Five noted, antagonists not only overlooked vulnerability, affordability, and capacity, but were also described as lacking in sensitivity, providing little or no emotional support, and could be regarded as be active or passive in their role. Given that this was the most prominent role discussed, further work is needed to examine in greater detail the dynamics and variability of the antagonist role and the

various actors that fulfil it, as well as the capacity to shift or improve aspects of this relationship.

The research approach adopted enabled identity work – referred to in phenomenological psychology as *narrative selves* (Langdridge, 2007) – to be foregrounded. A key example highlighting the power in acknowledging the sense of self, personal narrative and allowing stories to 'breath' (Frank, 2010), was found in Celeste's story where in tracing her story back she described how health issues and fertility problems were perceived to be the starting point or trigger for what was ultimately the 'presenting problem' when she established contact with the energy advice service. In this way, the work here sits alongside that which has adopted biographical narrative approaches to understanding energy histories, for instance (Shirani *et al.*, 2016).

Another strength in adopting a methodological and theoretical focus on identity was that it enabled certain aspects of policy discourses to be explored and expanded upon in the analysis of lived experience. This relates specifically to the work of Middlemiss (2017) and the discussion in Chapter Six regarding perceptions of deservingness. Deservingness was expressed through identity, for example as a parent or taxpayer, and in communicating energy vulnerability, identities worked as vehicles to share and articulate meaning in relation to deservingness. Peers play an important role and narratives here provide a window into what MacIntosh and Wright (2018) refer to as the 'shared typical'. Of particular importance is that while the energy problems that people experience might be similar or the same, the individual experiences of those problems are not, and markers of identity were presented as points of comparison, for instance, the lone parent being considered more deserving than the single person. The implications of this in understanding 'reaching the hard to reach' (Ambrose *et al.*,

2019), support seeking, advice acceptance, and wider wellbeing need further exploration. Future work to understand how a sensitivity to identity work in advice and support could be operationalised is needed in order to expand on the early reflections set out here and, ultimately, in designing and delivering provision that is helpful and supportive (Goldsmith, 2004).

Phenomenologically, people make sense of themselves and their relationships with others, and the problems they face and the solutions available, when communicating their accounts of energy vulnerability. Whether reference to the advice interaction itself or the research interview, both scenarios invited participants to share their stories of energy problems and related advice and support. The identities and roles expressed are powerful, relating to energy awareness, domesticity, culture and expectation, as well as vulnerability and health. They are woven into narratives of struggle and the processes (and failures) in getting help. They are used to justify action or inaction, acceptance or rejection. They provide nuance in efforts to understand why one person may regard a form of support as supportive, where another sees it as insensitive. Efforts to locate and examine key identities, then, are important in understanding approaches to alleviating fuel poverty through advice and support. However, it is critical to note that, while categorisation might be possible and valuable to a degree, the experiences and framings of key identities were not uniform across the sample, highlighting the importance of acknowledging heterogeneity. As such, this thesis argues that the goal should not be to clearly define, categorise or list which identities (and relations) do or do not shape experiences and perceptions, but instead to highlight the value in a greater focus on relations and identities more broadly as an important underlining factor in attitudes, behaviours and actions shaped by lived experience.

In the final findings chapter, Chapter Seven, the focus shifts towards the third element – *process*. It is here that the third and fourth research questions are addressed in more detail. These questions sought to better understand, from the lived experience of energy advisors and recipients of energy-related advice and support, the factors that shape and hinder effective provision. Beyond this, drawing more specifically on the fourth research question, the analysis provides insight as to how this is experienced across formal and informal settings, with consideration of the implications for policy and practice.

The findings here directly respond to the earlier noted limitation of the existing literature in providing an analysis of energy advice and support that is rooted in the interpretative, perceptual and experiential accounts of the energy advisors and householders interviewed. With the focus on effectiveness, it sets out a bottom-up framing rooted in lived experience, not a top-down, policy-driven assessment where the success of an advice scheme or service can be reduced, as Snell *et al.* (2018) state, to a "numbers game" (p.7). This approach enables the analysis to reflect on the formal and the informal experiences of energy-related advice and support together, instead of distinctly separated with one fixed on metrics and another largely hidden from policy, practice and research.

Adopting a phenomenological standpoint focusing on lived experience, the research posits that in terms of process, *effectiveness* can be understood as rooted in temporality, spatiality, communication, and the role of emotions. In terms of policy and practice, the analysis of temporal and spatial elements of what constitutes effective provision sets out evidence to support wider calls for the protection and expansion of energy advice and support, specifically that which is provided face-to-face and in the

home, which has been regarded a necessary service for certain households (Stewart, 2018).

While the thesis draws attention to the importance of temporality in understanding effectiveness, the methodological approach taken has illuminated the varying complexities in exploring the importance of time in relation to EAS. For example, one way in which the analysis develops this further is in terms of highlighting how interpretations of effectiveness vary at different time points. This again points to a need to reflect on provision in terms of that which is proactive (the 'early stage') and reactive (at 'crisis point') and a need to better understand how packages of or approaches to EAS might differ at different time points. Implicated in temporal dimensions, as the research findings illustrated, are variations across sources, settings and styles of formal and informal advice and support. In designing, delivering and evaluating energy advice and support, two areas where this evidence set out here could be developed include steps to understanding what an emergency response in the context of fuel poverty entails, and how the significance of seasonality (whether in terms of pay cycles or thermal comfort) can be drawn upon to consider ways of making existing provision even more effective.

With regards to how effectiveness is linked to communication, the data revealed that in communicating the experiences of and solutions to energy vulnerability often this involved not talking about energy, therefore requiring energy advisors to be adept in the language of benefits, housing, employment issues, as well as energy. As such, multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral work to better understand and tackle fuel poverty is critical. As with many complex social policy problems, a broad range of expertise must be drawn upon, including, as argued throughout this thesis, that gained through direct experience.

Bringing these key findings together has demonstrated how, through the application of an approach from phenomenological psychology, the analysis has been able to generate a deeper understanding of how effective energy-related advice and support is experienced and understood in the context of tackling fuel poverty. Across Chapters Five, Six and Seven, the analysis argues that a bottom-up framing of effective energy advice and support is located at the intersection of three areas – problems, people, and process. Drawing on several key examples, these findings brought together call for greater prominence to be given to these dynamic and overlapping dimensions in research, policy and practice where effective provision is a central aim.

8.2 The Lived Experience of Policy and Practice: methodological contributions

In the broadest terms, the main methodological contribution of this work is its location in qualitative psychology, and its position within the social sciences, as an underutilised methodological framework and approach in the context of energy scholarship more broadly. As Sovacool's (2014) extensive review highlighted, disciplinary expertise emanating from qualitative psychology and related areas account for less than one per cent of published work. This thesis and planned publications from the work detailed here will, therefore, add to this paucity of disciplinary expertise in the field.

Beyond this, as discussed in-depth in Chapter Four, this is a study of lived experience, a concept that has long been associated with a particular strand of qualitative psychology, that of phenomenological psychology (MacIntosh & Wright, 2018). Analysing twenty-four in-depth semi-structured interviews, this study provides a novel contribution to a rapidly expanding field of lived experience research in social policy in

the form of a phenomenological analysis of energy vulnerability and related advice and support. Acknowledging the critique of MacIntosh and Wright (2018), the study is mindful to move beyond the use of lived experience as a 'free floating' notion, not interrogated or examined in detail. As such, this work engages in-depth and meaningfully with the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the approach rooted in phenomenology, specifically phenomenological psychology.

It is worth briefly noting here that a common critique of such methods and use of smaller samples relates to issues in the generalisability and applicability of findings to wider populations beyond the sample included. In other words, the extent to which findings here convey an understanding of how people in general experience energy vulnerability and related advice and support. In setting out in detail the epistemological and methodological frame of this research, no such claims of generalisability in the positivist sense are made or aspired to. Instead, the notion of trustworthiness and related criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Elo *et al.*, 2014) for assessing this in qualitative research is applied. Relatedly, there is a level of theoretical generalisability or transferability from the findings, and these are acknowledged. The accounts provide valuable insights as to the *meaning* of the phenomena under study, not seeking or claiming definitive truths (as with positivist methodologies), and recognising that experiences are multiple, shifting, subjective, dynamic, contextual, and subject to change over time (Sullivan, Gibson & Riley, 2012). As well as considering trustworthiness and theoretical generalisability, the research draws on the notion of typicality, as introduced in Chapter Four, in the sense that some meaningful conclusions, not generalisations, can be drawn where commonalities in lived experience are identified.

As MacIntosh and Wright (2018) state, and of relevance here, is that such an approach allows us to reflect on how common experiences can be situated within "prevailing forms and trends" (MacIntosh & Wright, 2018, p.458). This is significant in setting out the conclusions of the research and its main contributions in relation to how it enables the exploration of the way in which policy and practice shape and mediate lived experience (MacIntosh & Wright, 2018). This section will bring together key findings and illustrate how in taking a lived experience approach blind spots and limitations in existing policy and practice have been identified and drawn out.

The first set of findings relate to the role of informal sources, settings and styles of energy-related advice and support. Noted in several places, this element of the work contributes to a recognised gap not just in research and policy focused on tackling fuel poverty, but in energy scholarship more broadly (Hargreaves & Middlemiss, 2020). This research, in the analysis of narrative accounts and development of a typology of key roles and relations, illustrates that members of a person's immediate interpersonal network – their relatives, friends, and neighbours – were regarded as "valuable sources of advice that [are] relevant, grounded and practical" (Simcock *et al.*, 2013, p.9), as commiserators with similar experiences (Goldmsith, 2004) and as experts by experience (McLaughlin, 2009). They were positioned as typically part of the solution, responsible for reducing feelings of isolation and instilling a sense of solidarity, among other positive impacts. They were more readily, easily and immediately accessible compared to other sources of advice and support, often making them the preferred first point of contact.

In Chapter Two, a review of the role of the informal other in policy and practice pointed towards a growing call for informal sources to play a small part in the targeting and reach of support, namely in identifying and referring relatives, neighbours, and friends

who might be considered at risk of fuel poverty. This research has shown that such relations, in their presence and absence, play a much more significant role in the experience of energy vulnerability. Commended as exceptional sources of support, peers – typically relatives, friends, and neighbours – often had limited resources themselves. As such, the findings amplify the sense of solidarity in shared experiences of energy vulnerability and poverty more broadly. The findings also give prominence and due recognition to the valuable but hidden role that others play in supporting those experiencing energy vulnerability. Further to there being little recognition of advice as an asset in tackling fuel poverty (Boardman, 2016), there is an almost complete absence of recognition of the role played by members of a person's immediate interpersonal network, including their family, friends and neighbours. In evidencing the links between formal and informal mechanisms of support, for example, and in response to the fourth research question, the interviewees suggest peers provide a form of wraparound or underlying support that strengthens and compliments other provision but has perhaps been less visible or acknowledged in policy and research to date.

A second policy-focused conclusion focuses more on missed opportunities for remedying presented issues. Contact with antagonists – most notably represented by landlords, job centre staff, and energy suppliers – illustrated numerous instances of missed opportunities to remedy or provide adequate support. While the interviewees in this research went on for a number of reasons to seek support elsewhere, the importance of adequately and appropriately supporting individuals at that first point of contact is illustrated in this study. The findings suggest that failure to do so exacerbates vulnerability, in terms of health and wellbeing, and links closely with the issue of hard-to-reach vulnerable energy consumers. Such failings were perceived to

keep people entrenched in fuel poverty and other forms of vulnerability, for example where not assessing a person's ability to pay resulted in worsening household debt. Based on these findings, it is argued that adequate attention in policy evaluation should, therefore, afford equal consideration to the failures in advice and support as to the strengths of certain approaches and initiatives.

Another limitation in current provision, as communicated by the energy advisors and householders, is that it is predominantly characterised by a response that is reactive, and typically delivered in a time of crisis. Detailed at length in the discussion in Chapter Seven, the research shows that, as a result, there are extensive experiences of hidden coping, with people being described as living 'on the edge'. This illustrates the strength in research, such as the present study, that draws on more fluid and flexible conceptualisations like that of 'energy vulnerability', where shifting, dynamic and varied experiences in, out and at the edges of vulnerability can be explored. A major concern and signal for further work that is highlighted by this research, in terms of policy and practice, is that while the demand of 'reactive' provision seems to push aside the potential for more 'proactive' provision, this results in advice and support dominated by dealing with crisis. As discussed in Chapter Seven, for example in Andrew and Arthur's experiences, an inability to support service users at the 'early stage' often made it more difficult or impossible to find a clear solution, and ultimately alleviate the experiences of energy vulnerability and related struggles.

A notable example of where this analysis of lived experience has deepened the understanding of hidden coping is in relation to social isolation. Highlighted in Chapter Seven, social isolation has featured in fuel poverty research with regards to having a cold or poor quality home and therefore not inviting people into the home as a result of worry or shame. While this is likely the case for many households, it frames isolation

as, to some extent, an active choice, again focusing on individualised models of decision-making in the context of fuel poverty and how action towards tackling fuel poverty involves 'helping' or 'nudging' people towards making different decisions. The evidence here, however, illustrates that feelings of loneliness and isolation also play out in the context of energy problems in terms of not having access to support. On the part of the householder, this is something out of their control. They are powerless to the presence or absence of support networks, specifically access to "commiserators" with "similar experiences" (Goldsmith, 1999, p.309).

A final way in which the analysis of lived experiencing highlighted a limitation in existing policy and practice relates to significant opportunities for reducing preventable demand (Low Commission, 2014). The research sets out evidence of how experiences are consumed with 'failed first attempts' at energy advice and support. Reducing preventable demand is not happening across the sector and herein lies a major reason for continued and increasing need for energy advice. Additionally, while this research details several experiences of people going on to seek second, third and even fourth sources of support, many other people may not pursue this, meaning that they endure difficult circumstances. This again highlights the hidden nature of energy problems and the need to better understand the dynamics and experiences of both 'failed' advice interactions (where a households does not go on to seek other support) and multiple advice interactions (where a household has experience – positive or negative – with multiple sources of support).

Trust, as several studies discussed in this thesis have highlighted (see for example Green et al., 1998; DECC, 2014; Darby, 2003), is a critical factor in supporting those experiencing or at risk of fuel poverty, as well as in the energy transition more broadly. The research here outlined how building and sustaining householder trust involves

remedying issues without errors or undue delays and as effectively as possible – again linking to an overarching findings that the experiences of seeking support with energy vulnerability are shrouded with missed opportunities to get it right. As highlighted in Chapter Six, this was typically conveyed as a failing on the part of those assuming the role of antagonist, where actions taken were not perceived to be in the best interests of the householder. The research here argues that there is no one-size-fits-all approach and that steps to understanding what action is in the best interest of the householder are critical. As noted in Chapter Seven, complex social problems require flexible and often creative responses, and policy design and in practical delivery of schemes an awareness of this should remain central. Setting out numerous examples of where this was not the case, the energy advisors spoke extensively about a failure to fully take account of a household's circumstances, their vulnerability or capacity. Areas in need of further exploration, as highlighted in the research, include affordability and ability to pay, mental health issues, the use of technology and the internet, and the presence or absence of support networks.

Relatedly, and underlining much of the discussion across the three findings chapters, is the poor relationship householders have with their energy suppliers, rooted in countless examples of poor support and service. Narratives of this relationship were consumed with mistrust, deception, discontentment, and at times, leaned towards perceptions of criminality. Dealing with the energy supplier was described as a game and a battle, both by households and the energy advisors who combined had more thirty years' experience in energy advice. The last point to note, then, on policy limitations uncovered in the analysis of lived experience centres here: on the potential for improving the relationship between the householder and the energy supplier. As

the evidence in this research illustrates, this relationship plays a key role in the, at times enduring, experiences of energy vulnerability.

A final blind spot noted in Chapter Seven and worth reiterating here relates to recommendations set out in earlier research examining the effectiveness of energy advice and support. In 2000, Boardman and Darby outlined that feedback must be an element of standard not best practice in energy advice provision. The professional experiences of the energy advisors and the wider literature suggests these recommendations have not been followed, and this was drawn out in the analysis in terms of effectiveness being understood as an elusive concept. The energy advisors did not really know if the advice and support they were providing was effective or not and had assumed a position of carry on until told otherwise. Given the threats to the sector outlined in Chapter One and the gradual decline in energy advice provision since 2012 (Ambrose *et al.*, 2019) the implementation of such additional measures seems unlikely, yet, from the perspective of those providing energy advice, something which is important. Further evidence, developing that which is presented here, is needed to examine the role of feedback specifically in the context of effective energy advice and support.

8.3 Understanding energy vulnerability and related advice and support: theoretical contributions

In drawing the thesis to a close, this final part of the conclusion chapter turns its focus to a group of findings that can be organised around theoretical and conceptual contributions. The thesis argues that, by engaging with theory, the study has been able to develop a more nuanced understanding in relation to several key areas and concepts, including energy vulnerability (Middlemiss & Gillard, 2015), tellability

(Norrick, 2000), characteristics of 'opportunistic' advice (Darby, 1999), and the strengths and limitations in drawing on Bell's (2020) frame of Working Class Environmentalism.

Before moving onto a discussion of these specific concepts, it is worth briefly noting how the research has developed a more overarching conceptualisation of 'advice' as a social process. Set out in Chapter Three, and drawn upon throughout the research, this conceptualisation hinged on elements of advice as a form of social support, social learning, and social influence. In this way, the conceptualisation set out in this thesis moves beyond typical characterisations that centre on what advice 'is' rather that what it 'does'. In moving towards a more active characterisation, that regards advice and support as socially constructed, embedded, and constrained, this shifts current thinking away from technical-rational models and brings the person, their experiences, and the relationships and interactions with others to the fore. This sense of interactivity and dialogue is, as argued in Chapter Three (Darby, 1999; Maby, Brain & Bull, 2007), what distinguishes advice and support from information sharing or mass campaigns where those considered vulnerable or in need of help are communicated to not with.

This basis – in understanding advice as a social process - connected the overarching conceptualisation of advice to relevant theory in understanding effectiveness, the main aim of the research, and ultimately to the application of Goldsmith's (2004) Communication Model of Advice (CMoA). Theorising advice and support by drawing on elements of Goldsmith's (2004) CMoA has allowed this research to set out a theoretically informed understanding of what constitutes effective energy-related advice and support. As noted, this is located at the intersection of three areas which regard effective provision as that which (1) works with tellable energy problems, (2)

acknowledges key roles and relations, and (3) considers factors relating to how provision can be regarded as meaningful, situated and rhetorical.

Moving from broader theoretical and conceptual reflections to a more specific example, the research, as discussed in Chapter Two, adopted the lens of energy vulnerability as a more fluid and flexible concept to examine the lived experience of fuel poverty. The work of Middlemiss and Gillard (2015) provides the conceptual outline for how energy vulnerability can be understood in relation to a household's exposure, sensitivity, and adaptive capacity. The analysis here, as noted in several places, similarly identified elements of exposure in terms of fuel poverty risk, and sensitivity, particularly in the discussion of the role of emotions in Chapter Seven. Regarding the third element of Middlemiss and Gillard's (2015) framing, adaptive capacity, the analysis in this study illustrates the critical role of social relations. In terms of a household's 'adaptive capacity', the experiential accounts highlight how social relations impact a household's ability to withstand, integrate or cope with energy-related problems – with some roles enhancing a household's capacity, and others reducing it.

Further, in utilising and seeking to expand upon the concept of energy vulnerability, the research highlights the significance in focusing on health-related experiences of energy vulnerability. There is an understandable predominant focus on the relationship between thermal comfort and health, typically connecting being cold with being in poor health; however, the narrative accounts of the interviewees highlighted that energy needs, and heightened energy vulnerability, as a result of poor health and wellbeing were about much more than warmth alone, with examples including administering medicine, capacity to keep clean and access hot water, doing laundry, and keeping cool. This shows that lacking energy services more broadly have serious

consequences for health, not just in terms of keeping warm, and to date, such aspects have received less focus in research and policy.

Another concept developed within this work is that of 'tellability' (Norrick, 2000) which is applied in Chapter Five to provide a theoretical perspective on the policy and practice framings of 'presenting problems'. Tellability, rooted in narrative inquiry, acknowledges processes of evaluation on the part of the person telling or communicating their story, here the experiences of energy vulnerability and related advice and support. Assessing what is of interest, relevance, and importantly, considered to be an 'appropriate experience', the application of the concept in this context uncovers important aspects with regards to how energy vulnerability is communicated. For example, as detailed throughout, social norms and cultural repertoires are drawn upon by the householders in situating their experiences, or in the telling of their energy-problems. The research argues that tellability has the potential to constrain narratives of vulnerability, where people refrain from sharing certain parts of their storied experiences. However, as Section 8.1 alluded to, tellability also provides a useful lens from which to understand the starting point of energy advice and support. In other words, as set out in the analysis, that one of the three components for understanding effective energy advice and support requires it to work with 'tellable' energy problems.

Introduced first in Chapter Two, there are several references throughout the thesis to the temporal dimensions of effectiveness, with terms such as 'opportunistic moments', 'moments of change', and 'liminal transitions' noted (see for example Rotmann, 2020; Grove *et al.*, 2017; Ambrose *et al.*, 2016; Thompson *et al.*, 2011; Darby, 2003). The research detailed in this thesis develops these existing notions that signify the importance of temporality. It does so by amplifying the dynamics and variability in how

opportunism is interpreted in relation to identities and seasonality, for example, discussed in Chapters Six and Seven. In Chapter Seven, the analysis highlights how transition and moments that may be regarded as opportunistic, such as moving to a new house, are not only practical and circumstantial, but they are also personal and emotional, tying closely with key identities set out in Chapter Six. As with the typologies in Chapter Six, there is a need to approach what constitutes 'opportunistic' with flexibility. Ultimately, this calls for caution as while transitions may nominally be the same, the way in which they impact upon social relations and the experiences of energy vulnerability can be distinctly different. As discussed in Chapter six, this was the case with Jean and Charles who had both recently experienced an adult child leaving the family home – making one feel more vulnerable and the other less.

Finally, in Chapter Five, the thesis applies a class-based theoretical lens to better understand narratives of energy use and saving in the context of energy vulnerability. Referred to conceptually as 'working class environmentalism', this lens intends to highlight a longstanding failure to recognise working class people as environmentalists, despite this group typically carrying the greatest environmental burdens in society and often being disproportionately affected by policy (Bell, 2020). As noted in Chapter Five:

> In a call for a more just, fair and inclusive environmentalism, Bell (2020) refutes the prevailing view that "poorer people are too preoccupied with meeting their basic needs for food, warmth, security to be able to think about, or be active on, environmental issues" (Bell, 2020, p.20)

The findings in this research provide a more nuanced frame here: for those experiencing energy vulnerability, which at times was of significant detriment to health and wellbeing, there is an understanding of energy use in terms of environmentalism,

not solely in terms of deprivation of services. Numerous examples of this are detailed in the analysis where energy saving, and environmental awareness were described as not solely or principally motivated by the potential to reduce costs and save money. In this way conserving and saving energy formed part of everyday practice, not just a response to energy-related crises.

The literature review, set out in Chapters Two and Three, revealed that environmentalism in the context of fuel poverty has received limited attention in research to date, highlighting an area in which further exploration is needed. One example can be found in a 2011 qualitative study where, similar to this research, the links between fuel poverty, environmentalism, and frugality were discussed as part of an overarching theme, not as a distinct area of focus (Jenkins, Middlemiss & Pharoah, 2011). Further work in this area particularly has the potential to add weight to the critique that focus should be on fixing the situation of fuel poverty, and the systems and processes that sustain it, not the individuals experiencing it and their behaviours.

As noted, in drawing on Bell's (2020) concept of working class environmentalism, the research detailed here provides a small but novel contribution in the form of applying a class-based theoretical lens to understand energy use and saving. The research, in Chapter Six, also provides a small contribution to the rapidly expanding area of study examining gender in the context of energy and energy vulnerability (see for example: Feenstra & Clancy, 2020; Robinson, 2019; Listo, 2018). Although modest and partial in their focus, these findings support wider calls to examine in greater detail intersecting vulnerabilities and the multidimensionality in the lived experience of fuel poverty (Middlemiss, 2020).

8.4 Final thoughts

The purpose of this study has been to generate a better understanding of the role of energy-related advice and support – an area that has been regarded as an underexplored, undervalued, yet critical part of the package of efforts to tackle fuel poverty. The number of people seeking support for energy and other related problems has risen in recent years. Meanwhile, those working in energy advice face increasing pressure and the sector as a whole faces threats of funding cuts as well as rapid shifts to remote support, which excludes and fails to adequately support some of the most vulnerable households. This situation is expected to worsen significantly as the implications of COVID-19 play out. Alongside this is the UK's crucial work towards reaching net zero carbon emissions by 2050, of which tackling fuel poverty is a key part (Groundworks, 2019; Institute for Health Equity, 2020).

To explore these aspects, this thesis has turned to the narrative accounts of those with lived experience of engaging in energy-related advice and support – as providers and recipients – to generate a better understanding of what effectiveness means and how it can be designed, delivered and evaluated in future provision. It evidences the importance of time and place, as well as communication and the role of emotions in the process of effective advice, but also draws out the significance of our relations with others, sometimes hidden and commonly those which exists beyond the formalised energy advice settings. In foregrounding lived experience in the context of social policy, the study strengthens the case for qualitative work in the field of fuel poverty, particularly with methods that put forward bottom-up framings, which here signalled the importance of working with tellable or presenting energy problems. As well as contributing a framework for understanding effectiveness in the context of energy advice and support, in a broader sense, it is hoped that this thesis makes two further

overarching contributions to the field. Firstly, that it is critical to ensure efforts are focused on fixing the situation of fuel poverty, not on fixing the 'fuel poor', and, secondly, that energy advice and support should not just be viewed as an important part of the package of efforts, but an essential one.

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Appendices
Appendix 1: Ethical approval

University of Salford
MANCHESTER

Research, Innovation and Academic
Engagement Ethical Approval Panel

Research Centres Support Team
G0.3 Joule House
University of Salford
M5 4WT

T +44(0)161 295 2280

www.salford.ac.uk/

10 March 2017

Dear Danielle,

RE: ETHICS APPLICATION–HSR1617-68–'Communicating energy vulnerability through energy advice.'

Based on the information you provided I am pleased to inform you that application HSR1617-68 has been approved.

If there are any changes to the project and/or its methodology, then please inform the Panel as soon as possible by contacting Health-ResearchEthics@salford.ac.uk

Yours sincerely,

Sue McAndrew
Chair of the Research Ethics Panel

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Title of study: Communicating energy vulnerability through energy advice

Name of Researcher: Danielle Butler

Invitation paragraph

My name is Danielle and I am a postgraduate researcher at the University of Salford. I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask questions if anything you read is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not to take part.

What is the purpose of the study?

This research project is being carried out as part of a postgraduate research degree at the University of Salford. Its purpose is to gain a better understanding of the types of energy problems and challenges people face in their homes and their experiences of giving or receiving energy advice.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to take part in the study because you have identified that you have experience of giving or receiving energy advice. This could be through an advice organisation, in your general day-to-day life (for example, at home), or through an online forum. The study aims to complete between 30-40 interviews with a number of individuals who have given or received advice in these different settings.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide. Taking part in this study is entirely voluntary. I will describe the study and go through the information sheet, which I will give to you to keep. I will then ask you to sign a consent form to show you agreed to take part. You are free to withdraw at any time during the interview, and can do so without giving a reason. It is important to know that if you would like to withdraw after the interview has finished then you can do so by contacting me **within 14 days**.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you decide to take part, we will complete an interview together. This may be in the advice organisation you have attended, in your own home or over the telephone. The interview should last no more than one hour. I will ask you a number of questions but it is important to know that there are no right or wrong answers. If there is anything you do not want to discuss, for any reason, you do not have to. If I do ask a question that you don't want to answer you can ask me to move on. You will only be asked to take part in the interview once, but will be able to contact me again afterwards if you wish to. With your permission, I will audio record the interview and take notes. After the interview, all audio recordings will be stored on a password protected computer that only I have access to. I will later transcribe (write up) the interviews. All interview transcripts and any other information I have about you will be kept on the password protected computer, and any hard copies will be kept in a locked filing cabinet at all times at the university.

Expenses and payments?

There will be no payment for taking part in the interview; however, as a thank you for your time **you will be given a £10 voucher**.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

It is unlikely that there will be any disadvantages to you or risk in taking part in the interview. However, it is possible that we may talk about some issues (energy-related or otherwise) that are of a sensitive nature and could involve talking about unpleasant memories and feelings from your experiences. The interview may also take place in your own home and so I want to ensure you feel entirely comfortable and in control of the discussion.

While it is hoped that the interview won't cause any discomfort or distress, it is important to remind you that your participation in entirely voluntary and that you can withdraw at any time during the interview (and up to 14 days afterwards) without needing to give a reason. Also, if there is anything you don't want to discuss, you don't have to and can ask me to move on to a different question or end the interview, if needed.

If for any reason you do feel distressed as a result of participating in this research you may wish to contact the Samaritans by calling 116 123 at any time and using any phone.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

I cannot promise that the study will have any direct benefits for you. It is hoped, however, that information from this research will help to increase the understanding of the types of energy-related challenges and problems people face in their own homes, and the role that energy advice plays in supporting people with such issues.

What if there is a problem?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study you should contact my supervisor, Dr Graeme Sherriff, in the first instance. Contact details for my supervisor are:

- G.sherriff@salford.ac.uk
  Tel: 0161 295 4987

If you remain unhappy and wish to complain formally you can do this through the University complaints procedure, and should contact Anish Kurien using the contact details below:

- Anish Kurien
  Research Centres Manager

  University of Salford,

  G.08, Joule House, Acton Square,

  Salford, M5 4WT

  t: +44 (0) 161 295 5276 **| e:** a.kurien@salford.ac.uk

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

All information which is collected about you during the research will be kept strictly confidential. All information and data (e.g. personal information, audio recordings, and interview transcripts) will be handled, processed and stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998). In research outputs, any identifying material such as names and addresses will be removed in order to ensure anonymity. Research findings will likely be shared with relevant organisations and services; however, any information you give will not be shared in a way that could identify you directly.

As already mentioned, data will be generated through an interview, which will be audio recorded with your permission. I will also take notes during the interview. Any information about you, audio recordings, and notes from the interview will be kept on a password protected computer or in a locked filing cabinet at the university, both only accessible by me and my supervisor, Dr Graeme Sherriff.

Any original data will be kept for a period of three years and will then be destroyed. After this only anonymous data will be kept, from which you will not be identifiable. Anonymised data, where you cannot be identified, may be used for future research outputs after this time.

Although unlikely, please be aware that if anything is revealed that relates to criminal activity and/or something that is harmful to self or other, I am required to share that information with the appropriate authorities.

What will happen if I don't carry on with the study?

If you decide to withdraw from the study all the information and data collected from you, to date, will be destroyed and your name removed from all the study files. This will include all audio recorded interviews. As mentioned before, there will be a 14 day period after the interview has finished in which you can withdraw from the study, and you can do so by contacting me using the details at the end of this information sheet.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results of this study will be written up into a thesis. Findings from the research may also be written up for other purposes, such as academic articles, online articles, blog posts, or briefing notes. It is likely that the findings will also be presented at relevant events and conferences. All outputs from the research will be produced in a way that makes sure you remain anonymous (e.g. by using pseudonyms, instead of real names), unless you have consented for me to do otherwise.

If you would like to find out more about the research findings, or have access to an electronic copy of the thesis or any other research outputs, please feel free to contact me and I will be happy to arrange this with you.

Who is organising or sponsoring the research?

I am responsible for organising this research. However, my work is completed under the supervision of Dr Graeme Sherriff. The research is funded by the University of Salford.

Further information and contact details:

If you agree, thank you for taking part in this research. If you choose not to participate, thank you for taking the time to read this information.

If you would like any further information or advice, whether for a problem related to your gas/electricity bills or otherwise, please consider contacting your local Citizens Advice. Details of the different ways in which you can access advice can be found on their website at: www.citizensadvice.org.uk. If you don't have internet access please feel free to ask me for this information, either at the time of the interview or using the contact details below.

In addition, if you want to contact me again about any aspect of your participation in the study, then please feel free to do so. My contact details are:

Name: Danielle Butler
Email: d.e.butler@edu.salford.ac.uk
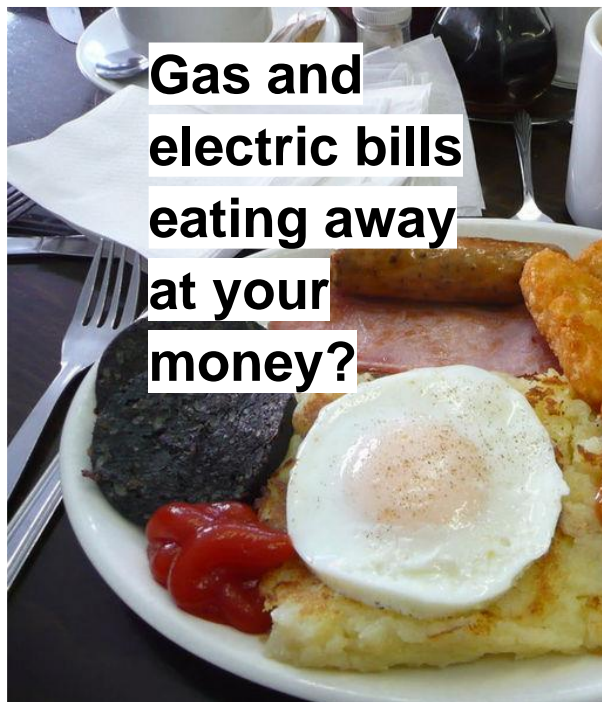
Gas and electric bills eating away at your money?

Struggled to keep the house warm? Unaffordable energy bills? Gas and electricity debts? Damp and mould? Trouble with your energy supplier?

I'm looking to talk to people about 'energy-related' problems and their experiences of giving or getting help. This will involve an interview over the phone lasting no longer than one hour. If you're interested in taking part, please contact me using the details below:

Name: Danielle Butler
Email: d.e.butler@edu.salford.ac.uk
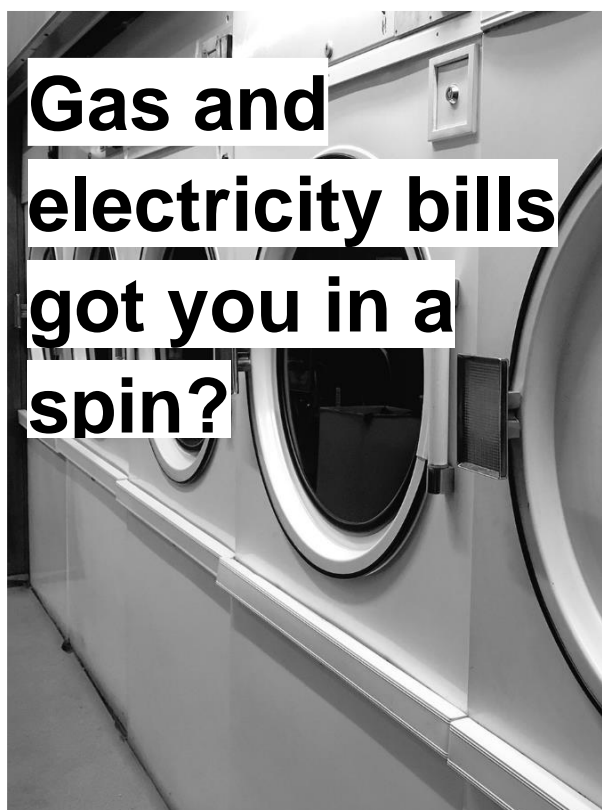Mobile: 07532036319

Gas and electricity bills got you in a spin?

Struggle to keep the house warm? Unaffordable energy bills? Gas and electricity debts? Damp and mould? Trouble with your energy supplier?

Do you, your family members, friends, and/or neighbours help one another with such problems? Do you share advice and information?

If so, a researcher at the University of Salford would like to talk with you.

CONSENT FORM

Title of study: Communicating energy vulnerability through energy advice.

Name of Researcher: Danielle Butler

Please complete and sign this form **after** you have read and understood the study information sheet.
Please read the statements below and circle yes or no, as applicable in the box on the right hand side.

	YES	NO
1. I confirm that I have read and understand the study information sheet [*Version 1.1, dated 27.02.2017*] for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions which have been answered satisfactorily.	YES	NO
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, and without my rights being affected.	YES	NO
3. If I do decide to withdraw I understand that the information I have given, up to the point of withdrawal, may be used in the research. The timeframe for withdrawal is **14 days**.	YES	NO
4. I agree to participate by taking part in an interview.	YES	NO
5. I understand that my personal details will be kept confidential and not revealed to people outside the research team.	YES	NO
6. I understand that my anonymised data will be used in (researcher's thesis/research report) other academic publications and conferences presentations.	YES	NO
7. I agree to take part in the study.	YES	NO

	Participant	Person taking consent (researcher)
Name		
Date		
Signature		

Interview Guide

General introduction

- Thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview.
- This research project is being carried out as part of a postgraduate research degree.
- I want to gain a better understanding of the types of energy problems and challenges people face in their homes and their experiences of giving or receiving energy advice.
- The interview should take no longer than one hour.
- There are three main parts I'd like to cover, but I will try to keep it as informal and as comfortable as possible, much like a conversation.
- With your permission, I will audio record the interview and take notes while we are talking.
- There are no right or wrong answers to the questions, I want to hear your honest views, whether positive or negative.
- If there is anything I ask that you don't want to discuss, ask me to move on.
- If you would like me to pause the interview or stop altogether, again it is fine to ask me to do so.
- This participant information sheet gives you more information about the study. Please read and ask me any questions you might have. I will ask you to sign a consent form before we begin to ensure that you are happy to take part and for me to record the interview and take notes.
- Any questions before we begin?

PART 1
I want to talk to you about the sorts or energy-related, or gas- and electricity-related problems, people face in their own homes, and I'd also like to discuss advice and information related to these types of problems and challenges. First, though, I'd like to know a little bit more about your own household and day-to-day life at home.

HOUSEHOLD MEMBERS: Who lives there? Dependents? Age ranges? **DAILY ROUTINES:** Studying/working hours, socialising habits, other commitments inside or outside the home, etc. **PRIORITY NEEDS OF HOUSEHOLDERS:** Health reasons, age of householders, other circumstances, etc.	**TECHNOLOGY AND THE INTERNET:** General use of internet and/or other technology and appliances at home? i.e. Paying bills, socialising, work/study, entertainment, etc. **THE PROPERTY:** Age of property? Tenure? How long in property? Any work needed? Changes already made(retrofit)?

PART 2: Energy Supply in Your Home
I'd now like to talk about 'energy' or gas and electricity in the home. Can you tell me a little bit about your own gas and/or electricity supply?

ENERGY SUPPLIER:	USES AND PRIORITIES:
Since when? Why this/these energy suppliers? Contact with supplier?	Greatest/most important uses of electricity and/or gas in your home?
PAYMENT:	**MONITORING AND PRACTICAL ASPECTS:**
Current/preferred method of payment? Why? Since when? Affordable?	Location of meters, regularity of meter readings/Smart meter, etc.

PART 3: Energy-related problems
Can you tell me about the sorts of problems people face with fuel or energy in the home? These could be difficulties or problems you have faced or it could be experiences you've been told about by other people.
Some examples might include: bills, energy debts, temperature of household (too cold or too hot, different times of year), household condition (i.e. damp and mould)

*Take care to clarify whether participants are discussing their own experiences or the experiences of others.

Some examples might include: bills, energy debts, temperature of household (too cold or too hot, different times of year), household condition (i.e. damp and mould)

*Take care to clarify whether participants are discussing their own experiences or the experiences of others.
What are the energy-related problems/challenges people most need help with? Why?
(Most) common problems?
Most difficult problems?
Impact and effects of these challenges?
Barriers to resolving these types of issues?
Why do these problems exist?

PART 4: Giving and getting help
I'd now like to talk about getting help with energy or fuel related problems in the home. Can you tell me a little bit about your experience of 'energy advice'?
IF IDENTIFYING AS AN 'ENERGY' ADVISOR:
Talking about the way/ways in which you've <u>helped or talked to someone</u> (with/about an energy-related problem or issue). (*Thinking of one or two specific examples - if there are many.)   **ABOUT THE ISSUE/CHALLENGE(S):**   Energy bills/debts/costs? Keeping warm or cool? Problems with energy suppliers? Landlords? Other people/organisations? What led to this/how did it come about?

Talking about the way/ways in which you've <u>helped or talked to someone</u> (with/about an energy-related problem or issue). (*Thinking of one or two specific examples - if there are many.)

ABOUT THE ISSUE/CHALLENGE(S):
Energy bills/debts/costs? Keeping warm or cool? Problems with energy suppliers? Landlords? Other people/organisations? What led to this/how did it come about?

THE 'ADVICE' INTERACTION(S):
Who prompted the conversation? How did it begin?
Your roles/responsibilities – advisor, parent, etc.
Their roles/responsibilities
Length of interaction
Where did it take place?

FINDING THE SOLUTION/RESPONSES(S):
What did you suggest? What solution(s) did you come up with?
Can you talk me through the process by which you came to this/these solutions? Is this typical?
How did you know this? Good or bad places to go for information and why?
Anticipated/unanticipated barriers to finding a solution?
Training/learning?

AFTER THE INTERACTION:
Any follow up? Do you know if the problem was overcome/dealt with?
Anything stopping the person(s) from being able to act on this 'advice'?

IF IDENTIFYING AS AN ADVISEE:

Talking about the way/ways in which you've been <u>helped or talked to someone</u> (with/about an energy-related problem or issue). (*Thinking of one or two specific examples - if there are many.)

ABOUT THE ISSUE/CHALLENGE(S):
Energy bills/debts/costs? Keeping warm or cool? Problems with energy suppliers? Landlords? Other people/organisations? What led to this/how did it come about?

THE 'ADVICE' INTERACTION(S):
Who prompted the conversation? How did it begin?
Your roles/responsibilities – advisor, parent, etc.
Their roles/responsibilities
Length of interaction
Where did it take place?

FINDING THE SOLUTION/RESPONSES(S):
What was suggested? What solution(s) were put forward?
Can you tell me about how this was communicated to you?

ANYTHING ELSE

If not covered in the interview, check:

Age	
Household formation	
Tenure	
Advisor/Advisee	
Advice setting	
Interview type and setting	