

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the  
Perceptions, Attitudes and Experiences of Energy  
Vulnerability among Urban Young Adults

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## List of Abbreviations

<b>DCLG</b>	Department for Communities and Local Government
<b>DECC</b>	Department for Energy and Climate Change
<b>EHS</b>	English Housing Survey
<b>HHSRS</b>	Housing Health and Safety Rating System
<b>ONS</b>	Office for National Statistics
<b>PPM</b>	Prepayment meter
<b>WHECA</b>	Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Act
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organisation

## Abstract

In England, fuel poverty (FP) is estimated to affect as many as 2.35 million households. ‘Young adult households’ – those where the oldest member is younger than twenty-five – are disproportionately more likely to be fuel poor than any other age group. However, research focused specifically on this demographic group, particularly among young adult, non-student households, remains almost entirely absent from the evidence base. Contributing to this gap, the present research adopted a qualitative methodological approach to explore how urban young adults construct and make sense of their relationship with domestic energy as independent household members. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, six semi-structured interviews were undertaken with young adults who were not in education and had recent or current experience of living independently within an urban context (Salford, Greater Manchester). Analytic focus was directed towards the subjective experiences of how domestic energy is used and paid for, as well as energy related challenges and vulnerabilities. Multiple experiences of and exposure to conditions typical of FP were disclosed, including: self-disconnection of energy supply, energy debts, cold homes and unrelenting challenges associated with damp and laundry practices. Detailed discussion of the findings is presented under three emergent themes: *‘establishing the independent home’*, *‘threats to home comfort’* and *‘energy and coping’*. Limitations and suggestions for further research are considered, including the potential to further define the homogeneity of the sample by considering certain sub-demographic groups, such as young adult migrants, lone-parents or those within specific household formations.

Keywords: *fuel poverty, energy vulnerability, young adults, independent household member, lived experience, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*



# **An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the Perceptions, Attitudes and Experiences of Energy Vulnerability among Urban Young Adults**

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **1.1 Rationale for this research**

Fuel poverty literature to date has extensively researched a number of 'vulnerable' groups within society, such as the elderly (O'neill, Jinks and Squire, 2006), families (Harrington, Heyman, Merleau-Ponty, Stockton, Ritchie, & Heyman, 2005) and those with long-term illnesses or disabilities (Snell, Bevan & Thompson, 2015; Liddell, & Morris, 2010). One demographic group that remain almost entirely absent from the evidence base are young adult households (Bouzarovski, Petrova, Kitching, & Baldwick, 2013).

According to the most recent government statistics, published by the Department for Energy and Climate Change (DECC), "*those households where the oldest person is younger than 25 are the most likely to be living in fuel poverty*" (DECC, 2015a, p.45). While these figures have been regarded as a consequence of this age group having lower than average earnings and an increased likelihood to be living in the most energy inefficient housing (DECC, 2015a), they illustrate that attempts to better understand how young adult households experience energy- and fuel poverty-related challenges and vulnerabilities are of critical importance.

Research has suggested that fuel poor young adults may fail to acknowledge or recognise that they are living in conditions indicative of fuel poverty (Bouzarovski *et al.*, 2013). This

presents key challenges for strategies which set out to alleviate or eradicate the issue, whereby the potential to effectively target support is restricted by issues related to a lack of awareness or acknowledgement at the household level. Essentially, if young adult households do not conceive of themselves as living in fuel poverty, the likelihood that they will actively seek out or acknowledge assistance directed towards them is highly improbable.

Furthermore, where young adult households do recognise conditions indicative of fuel poverty, a significant barrier may be characterized by the household's capacity to act. The majority of young adult households in the UK are living as tenants in some of the most energy inefficient housing, predominantly across the private rented sector (DECC, 2015a). In this regard, in order to access the benefits of fuel poverty assistance, young adult households mostly rely on the willingness of those who own the properties (i.e. landlords) to take appropriate action (Ambrose, 2015a).

The decision to research this demographic group specifically was further motivated by recent figures highlighting the increasing vulnerability among young adults, not only in terms of fuel poverty, but also with regards to income poverty<sup>1</sup>. Over the last decade, the sharpest increases in the number of those living in income poverty has been observed among young adults under the age of 25 (JRF, 2015). It is important to note, however, that fuel poverty is widely recognised as a distinct form of deprivation, in that a fuel poor

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<sup>1</sup> In the UK, a household is considered to be living in income poverty if the total household income is less than 60% of the national median income (ONS, 2015). In 2013, almost a third of the UK population (33%) had experienced income poverty for at least one year during the period 2010-2013.

household will not always be income poor, and conversely the poorest households are not always living in fuel poverty (Boardman, 2010). Nonetheless, as highlighted, certain demographic groups, such as those aged 18-25, have been identified as having a higher than average propensity to be income poor *and* fuel poor. Therefore, such households must undoubtedly be among some of those facing the greatest challenges and vulnerabilities in the UK at present.

## 1.2 Research Aims and Objectives

A review of the existing literature identified only one study to date which has specifically focused on young adult households who may be living in or at risk of fuel poverty (Bouzarovski *et al.*, 2013). Bouzarovski *et al.* (2013) outlined that “*issues of recognition are central to understanding and addressing this group’s susceptibility to domestic energy deprivation*” (p.1), suggesting that at a fundamental level, further research should aim to generate a greater understanding of underlying processes related to recognition and awareness in the context of fuel poverty. The main purpose of this research, therefore, was to expand on this limited understanding by adopting a qualitative approach to explore how young adult households construct and make sense of their perceptions, attitudes and experiences of fuel poverty in the independent home. However, considering the findings from earlier research, it could be expected that such households may not conceive of themselves as living in fuel poverty, therefore, this research intentionally considered more broadly the lived experience of young adults living as independent household members.

In focusing on the context of the independent home, a central aim was to analyse the ways in which independent household members under the age of 25 construct and make

sense of their relationship with domestic energy (i.e. gas and electricity). A critical aspect of this was to focus on the way in which young adults may perceive themselves to be burdened by energy-related challenges and vulnerabilities. This involved approaching the research from a different perspective; one which considered an emerging concept termed 'energy vulnerability'. As proposed by Middlemiss and Gillard (2015), energy vulnerability explores the experiences of fuel poverty not as a fixed state – for example, where a household either *is* or *isn't* fuel poor – but instead considers how different households may have varying degrees of vulnerability to fuel poverty in terms of their “*exposure, sensitivity and adaptive capacity*” (p.147).

In order to generate a greater understanding of the perceptions, attitudes and experiences of fuel poverty among young adult households, this research was guided by two key objectives:

1. By exploring the lived experience of young adults, focusing on the ways in which they construct and make sense of their experiences of living independently and managing the independent home, what can we learn about their relationship with domestic energy (i.e. gas and electricity)?
2. Considering the concept of energy vulnerability, which expresses a need to consider fuel poverty as a dynamic issue which affects different households in different ways, what can we learn about the way in which young adults construct and make sense of fuel poverty-related issues and challenges in the independent home?

It is hoped that the outcomes of this research will offer some detailed insights into the relationship that young adult households have with domestic energy (i.e. gas and electricity), and consequently how such households experience energy- or fuel poverty-related challenges and vulnerabilities. Furthermore, with urban young adults representing an underresearched demographic group in the field of fuel poverty, such research will work to inform future policy on how best to target and deliver support.

### 1.3 Introducing Salford Citizens Advice

Prior to and during the completion of this research, the researcher was an employee of the national advice charity: Citizens Advice. In the last year alone, the organisation has helped more than two million members of the public with a wide variety of issues, including: housing matters, debt problems, complications with making and managing benefit claims, as well as consumer issues, among many others (Citizens Advice, 2015a). Specific to the context of this research, Citizens Advice also assists service users with a broad range of energy-related matters. Common reasons for seeking assistance include: difficulties in dealing with utility companies, a need for advice and information on switching suppliers, specialist energy debt advice, applications to energy supplier trust funds, as well as help with accessing specific public funds (i.e. the 'winter fuel' or 'cold weather' payments).

As the UK's largest advice provider, the service is delivered across more than 3000 community locations and run by over 300 individual charities. Of these individual charities, the researcher works specifically for Salford Citizens Advice. Operating face-to-face, telephone, and email advice services across a number of bureaux and outreach

locations, Salford Citizens Advice assists members of the public who live or work in Salford.

The researcher's role within the organisation principally involves conducting introductory interviews with clients, most often as a first point of contact with the service. This typically consists of making referrals or signposting service users in Salford onto the most appropriate source of help or information, and where possible assisting clients to achieve particular outcomes independently. With regards to energy- or fuel poverty-related issues specifically, the service has access to a specialist team of energy advisors.

Early conversations with the supervisory team and management at Salford Citizens Advice revealed an opportunity to explore the experiences of young adults who had previously accessed the service. In particular, this decision was motivated by personal observations made as an employee, where often younger service users appeared to present certain issues in different ways, compared to those adults who were older. Considering in particular the findings of Bouzarovski *et al.* (2013), as previously highlighted, the researcher's experience of assisting young adult service users with domestic energy-related issues in the independent home highlighted similarities. For example, where young adults have accessed the service for help with personal debts, it is often the case that during the initial interview energy debts will not be discussed as a matter of priority, if disclosed at all. While it is unclear what motivates or drives this failure to discuss energy debts, this observation illustrates just one way in which the behaviours of young adult households may demonstrate that they do not conceive of themselves as living in or at risk of fuel poverty, despite disclosing experiences (i.e. energy debts) which may indicate otherwise.

Furthermore, another observation is that a large proportion of young adults accessing the service present with issues relating to their experiences as tenants, largely but not exclusively, within the private rented sector. This prompted an interest in the housing pathways of this demographic group, who are mostly at the entry point of their housing careers. As noted by DECC, young adult households have a greater propensity to be living in fuel poverty due, in part, to their increased likelihood to be living in some of the poorest housing conditions, predominantly as tenants across the private rented sector (DECC, 2015a). In view of this, the researcher was also interested in how experiences of poor housing conditions, such as damp or inadequate heating/ventilation systems, might reveal aspects of young adult households' understanding and awareness of energy efficiency, or inefficiency, as well as their relationship with domestic energy more broadly.

It is important to note that during early conversations between the researcher, the supervisory team, and the organisation critical considerations were made with regards to potential conflicts of interest between the researcher and participants/service users, as well as discussions around key ethical considerations and how these attended to throughout the study. Salford Citizens Advice is a strictly confidential service, and this approach to service delivery is one in which the researcher has substantial experience. The organisation were fully aware that prior to any service user participation full ethical approval would be gained from the university's ethics board. In addition to ethical approval, organisational agreement was obtained (see *Appendix 2*).

#### 1.4 Fuel poverty in Salford

As noted, this research focused on the lived experience of six, low-income, urban young adults, all of whom were recruited through Salford Citizens Advice, and were therefore

living in Salford at the time of being interviewed. Situated in the North West of England, Salford is home to almost a quarter of a million people, of which more than 50,000 individuals are young adults aged 18-25 years-old (ONS, 2011).

The most recent government figures published by DECC estimate that there are more than ten thousand, or as many as one in ten, fuel poor households in Salford (DECC, 2015a). Compared to the aggregated national figures, where approximately 2.35 million or 10.4% of households in England are estimated to be living in fuel poverty, Salford's level of fuel poverty can be considered somewhat typical of other parts of the country. Notably, however, the statistics show that there are significant variations in the prevalence of fuel poverty across the city, and in the most severely affected areas as many as one in four households could be classified as fuel poor (DECC, 2014a).

Furthermore, emphasising the extent of the issue across the city, a report presented to the Salford Health and Wellbeing Board in July 2015 highlighted that more than 7% of Salford residential properties have been categorised as a 'Health and Housing Safety Rating Systems Category 1 hazard on grounds of Excessive Cold' (Salford City Partnership, 2015). Introduced under the Housing Act 2004, the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) assesses all properties, irrespective of ownership or tenure, utilising "*a risk assessment approach to enable risks from hazards to health and safety in dwellings to be minimised*" (Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, 2015a). Detailed within the report, one aspect of this assessment categorises properties in relation to the hazard of 'Excess Cold in UK Dwellings' (Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, 2015b), in which 'Excess Cold' is defined as "*a hazard which covers the threats to health from sub-optimal indoor temperatures*" (Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, 2011).



These figures demonstrate that many households in Salford are gravely impacted by fuel poverty - struggling to sustain adequate levels of thermal comfort while suffering from the consequences of energy inefficient homes.

## 1.5 The Structure of this Thesis

Within this chapter, **Chapter One**, the research has been introduced. The decision to explore the perceptions, attitudes and experiences of fuel poverty among young adult households has been justified, along with the research aims and objectives, which have together been situated within the wider context of the existing evidence base and current UK fuel poverty statistics. Noting on the researcher's position within the advice organisation, Salford Citizens Advice, personal experiences and motivations for conducting this piece of research have been highlighted, as well the method of participant recruitment chosen.

**Chapter Two** presents some of the key findings gathered from a literature review which was conducted around two broad areas of research and policy publications. Firstly, the literature review focuses on the concepts of fuel poverty, energy vulnerability, and the features that characterise a household's relationship with domestic energy. Given that this research focuses on a specific age group (i.e. 18-25 years old, or 'young adulthood') and their experiences within a specific context (i.e. the independent home), the second part of the literature review considers what distinguishes and characterises this demographic group, as well as considering what previous research investigating young people and housing can offer to the present research.

In the final section of Chapter Two (see *Section 2.7*) the findings from the literature review are summarised and the research questions introduced. Essentially, the purpose of this chapter will be to situate the present research within the wider literature base, highlighting the contribution to knowledge this study intends to offer. As already noted, young adult households currently represent an underresearched group despite recognition of the significant risk they face with regards to fuel poverty. Using an original analytical approach (outlined in Chapter Three), this research will offer rich and detailed insights into the experiences of this demographic group in terms of their relationship with energy in the independent home, as well as energy- and fuel-related challenges and vulnerabilities.

The methodological approach used to address the research questions is outlined in **Chapter Three**, which is broadly presented in two sections. The first attends to the process of research design and provides the rationale for some of the key decisions made. The second part of this chapter turns the attention to the participants and the data, detailing participant recruitment, the sampling strategy, as well as the method of data collection and analysis. This chapter concludes by introducing the three master themes which emerged from the analysis: *'establishing the independent home'*, *'threats to home comfort'* and *'energy and coping'*.

**Chapter Four** and **Chapter Five** present the main findings from the analysis. In the first of the findings chapters, Chapter Four, the analytic focus is directed towards how the participants construct and make sense of their experiences of living independently. It is within this chapter that the first master theme, *'Making home: establishing the independent home'*, is discussed. This chapter also explored the varied and dynamic

housing pathways of the sample, highlighting the impermanence, and at times instability, experienced by the sample.

The second findings chapter, Chapter Five, focuses more specifically on domestic energy in the home, aiming to better understand young adult households' relationship with energy as well as identified challenges and vulnerabilities. The analysis identified four energy-related threats to comfort, as well as a number of coping mechanisms, which will be discussed within this chapter.

The final chapter, **Chapter Six**, will conclude the thesis, beginning with a summary of the main findings from the research. The limitations of the present study are considered, and suggestions for further research presented. After this, the process of reflexivity is commented on, attending to the researcher's subjective role within the research. Lastly, the thesis is concluded with some final thoughts.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research was to expand on the limited understanding of how young adult households construct and make sense of their perceptions, attitudes and experiences of domestic energy, and therefore any potential experiences of fuel poverty, in the independent home. Given that the existing evidence base in this area is extremely limited, the present research intended to look more broadly at the lived experience of young adults; specifically, with regards to their experiences of living independently and managing the independent home. The literature review was conducted around two broad areas of work, which included:

1. Research and policy publications focused on domestic energy, energy efficiency, energy-related household behaviours, domestic energy deprivation, fuel poverty and energy vulnerability.
2. Research and policy publications concerned with the distinguishing features and characteristics of young adulthood, with a predominant focus on young adults and housing.

Concentrating initially on energy and fuel poverty, the literature review aimed to better understand the nature, causes, and impacts of the issue, as well as considering the framework of 'energy vulnerability', as introduced in Chapter One. It is also within the first part of this chapter that the characteristics and features of what constitutes a householder's '*relationship with energy*' are considered.

Given that this research is concerned with a specific demographic group (i.e. young adults aged 18-25) and their experiences within a specific context (i.e. the independent home), the literature review directed a focus towards relevant research within these areas of work. This is discussed in Section 2.6. In particular, it will be important to gain a better understanding of what factors distinguish and characterise this age group, compared to the experiences of other age groups. Furthermore, previous research dedicated to better understanding young adults and housing may offer key insights into the practices and processes involved in establishing one's status as an independent household member, and consequently, may also offer preliminary insights into how this relates to their experiences of independently managing domestic energy in the home.

This chapter will be concluded with a summary of the main findings from the literature review, providing a rationale for the chosen research questions, which are also presented in the final section (Section 2.7).

## 2.2 Fuel Poverty

### 2.2.1 Background

Traditionally, fuel poverty is understood as a situation in which a household cannot afford to adequately heat the home at a reasonable cost. Fuel poverty has been described as: *“a recognised social problem that affects the poor, with its roots in the quality of the housing stock and the cost of fuel”* (Boardman, 2010, p.1). Essentially, it is the convergence of these three factors – *low-income, energy inefficient housing and high energy costs* – which are widely acknowledged as the key determinants of fuel poverty. Although low-incomes and high fuel costs are recognised contributory factors, Boardman (2012) notes how these

are both issues which can also be experienced by non-fuel poor households. Therefore, in differentiating fuel poverty from other forms of poverty, the distinguishing characteristic 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, 2012, p.xv).

Fuel poverty is not only an issue concerned with the capacity of a household to achieve adequate warmth. Although, more than half of the residential energy supply is used for space heating (Shorrocks and Utley, 2003), fuel poverty can also be thought of more broadly as: *“a condition in which a household lacks a socially- and materially-necessitated level of energy services in the home”* (Buzar, 2007, p.1909).

The negative impacts of fuel poverty, particularly with regards to the consequences for health, have been well documented in the literature, as well as receiving widespread attention across the media. Figures estimate that illnesses caused by living in cold homes may result in additional costs to the National Health Service by as much as £1.3 billion per year, and evidencing the most severe of human costs, excess winter deaths attributable to cold homes account for thousands of deaths in the UK each year (Energy Bill Revolution, 2015). National Energy Action, a national fuel poverty charity, remarked that fuel poverty-related mortality is *“a bigger killer across the UK than road accidents, alcohol or drug abuse combined”* (NEA, 2015, p.3). Consequences extend beyond the impacts on physical health and affect those of all ages. Research has highlighted increased absences from school among children living in cold homes, and for adolescents, a significantly increased risk of multiple mental health problems (Liddell & Morris, 2010).

### 2.2.2 Who are the fuel poor?

According to the most recent Annual Fuel Poverty Statistics Report, there are an estimated 2.35 million, or as many as one in ten, fuel poor households in England (DECC, 2015a). Government figures have highlighted that certain household and dwelling characteristics indicate an increased likelihood to be living in fuel poverty. Among other categories, households which have a higher than average propensity to be fuel poor include: unemployed households (30% of which are estimated to be in fuel poverty), households 'off the gas network' (13%), lone-parent families (25%), those living in the private rented sector (19%), households using prepayment meters (PPM) (23%), and, of significant importance to this research, those where the oldest member of the household is aged 16-24 years-old (23%) (DECC, 2015a).

### 2.2.3 Measuring fuel poverty

Traditionally, fuel poverty has been measured using the 10% indicator by which a household is considered to be fuel poor if needing to spend "10 percent of income on energy to maintain a healthy living environment" (National Energy Action, 2014). In 2011, DECC commissioned an independent review 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).

Recommendations from the final report, published in 2012, outlined a revised definition of fuel poverty under the Low Income High Cost Indicator (LIHC). This measure has since been introduced as the official definition for fuel poverty in England, implemented within the new fuel poverty strategy (DECC, 2015b), and used to determine the scale of the

problem as reported in the most recent Annual Fuel Poverty Statistics Report (DECC, 2015a). The Hills Review (2012) has been highly commended for its efforts to reassert the seriousness of fuel poverty, the urgency required in dealing with the issue, and 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).

It is important to note, however, that in the devolved administrations of Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, the governments continue to utilise the 10% measure (NEA, 2014). While many common indicators of fuel poverty, such as low income or households of single elderly people, are generally identified in all four countries, it has been emphasised that due to *“the myriad of ways in which the situation in the four countries varies”* it is reasonable for fuel poverty policy to remain a devolved responsibility (Boardman, 2010, p.194). As this research is concerned with the experiences of fuel poverty for those residing in an urban location in England, it is important to consider some of the implications of the newly implemented measure - that is the LIHC indicator.

Under the LIHC indicator a household is considered to be fuel poor 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, 2015a).



Unlike the 10% indicator, the LIHC is considered to be a relative measure. In this regard, the revised definition uses national median levels of income and energy costs to determine which households are classified as fuel poor. Not only identifying the number of households living in fuel poverty (as with the 10% indicator), the LIHC measure also allows for the consideration of the depth of the issue as experienced by different groups of households, as well as on a national aggregated level. Termed the 'fuel poverty gap', this aspect of the LIHC indicator is simply defined as "*a measure of how much more fuel poor households need to spend to keep warm compared to typical households*" (DECC, 2015b, p.16). It is this aspect of the new indicator - one that does not only measures the number of households living in fuel poverty but also makes attempts to examine the depth and severity of the issue - which has received considerable praise (Moore *et al.*, 2012).

However, serious concerns have been voiced regarding the definition of high energy costs used in the LIHC, questioning whether the proposed energy cost threshold (the '*median energy costs*') accurately represents '*reasonable costs*' for many different households (ibid). In the report '*Improving the Hills Approach to Measuring Fuel Poverty*', Moore *et al.* (2012) highlights that under the LIHC almost 700,000 households would no longer be classed as fuel poor. The Hills Review (2012) states that, while these households are recognised as living in income poverty, they reside in smaller households with lower energy costs, therefore presenting issues of income poverty, not fuel poverty. However, as Moore *et al.* argues: the "*Hills Review fails to adequately consider whether these households can keep their homes warm at 'reasonable' cost*" (ibid, p.19), highlighting that living in a small property does not necessarily indicate that adequate warmth and

provision of energy services can be achieved by what is regarded as *reasonable* and *affordable* energy costs for that household.

Understanding the relevance of the 'fuel poverty gap' is particularly important to the context of this research, as DECC highlighted "*those households where the oldest person is younger than 25 are the most likely to be in fuel poverty (23%), but also have a relatively small fuel poverty gap*" (2015a, p.45). Put simply, this suggests that, despite needing to spend more than a typical household on energy costs, fuel poor young adult households do not need to spend as much as other, older, age groups also living in fuel poverty. In statistical terms, according to the most recent government figures, the fuel poverty gap for fuel poor households aged 16-24 was £260 above the national median average, compared to £450 for those aged over 60 (DECC, 2015a).

One suggestion is that the larger fuel poverty gap observed among older households may be related to longer heating regimes as a result of increased time spent in the home. While this assumption may hold merit, it is important to consider that calculations, such as the fuel poverty gap, which are based on median level energy costs and spending, do not necessarily reflect the energy needs of the household, and furthermore, whether the amount being spent on energy is sufficient or not to meet these needs (Hills, 2012). In this regard, a smaller fuel poverty gap doesn't necessarily indicate a lesser degree of vulnerability, or that the experiences of fuel poverty are less severe.

Besides, as with the above noted critique of the LIHC in that it assumes smaller homes have lower energy costs which are reasonable and affordable to such households, using the fuel poverty gap to examine the severity of fuel poverty among young adult households makes a similar assumption that such households can be characterised as a

homogenous group. The heterogeneity of young adult households – whether in terms of financial resources, educational levels, employment status, physical and mental health and wellbeing, household compositions, as well as factors such as personal backgrounds, levels of resilience and confidence - must all be acknowledged. In terms of the present research, it is important that the similarities and differences between participants and their experiences are attended to in a balanced and well-rounded analytical approach; in this way, ensuring that critical considerations of the heterogeneity of this demographic group, in terms of their experiences of fuel poverty, are made.

#### 2.2.4 Effectively targeting support

A key challenge for those involved in tackling the issue of fuel poverty centres on increasing effective targeting of support towards fuel poor households. Indeed, the comprehensive Hills Review (2012) and subsequent introduction of the LHC was a direct response to a growing need to review and readdress the way in which fuel poverty is defined and measured, and consequently how fuel poor households can be identified. Possibly the most significant challenge in effectively identifying those who are fuel poor is the scale of the task involved, as Hills (2012) notes:

*“...all targeting will involve a degree of administrative burden, particularly in terms of collecting the data needed. In principle, a detailed household and building sample survey followed by sophisticated modelling work is required to establish how many and which types of households have low incomes and high costs at a national level. It would be prohibitively expensive – and intrusive – to carry this out for all households. Instead, those working to tackle fuel poverty – government agencies,*

*local government, energy suppliers and voluntary organisations – use simpler proxy indicators to try to find the households in need of assistance” (Hills, 2012, p.73).*

For fuel poverty policy, major concerns also extend beyond challenges in identifying the fuel poor. Effectively targeting support is not only concerned with the ways in which households are targeted but also the effectiveness of support delivery once such households have been identified. A common issue encountered is the failure to take-up or engage with strategies to alleviate fuel poverty, even after a fuel poor household has been identified and contacted (DECC, 2014a). The evidence suggests that there are various reasons why fuel poor households make the decision not to act or take-up targeted support, with such barriers including: a lack of trust, excessive information or information that is too complicated, confusion regarding eligibility, pride, or lack of partnership working between agencies (Dodds & Dobson, 2008).

### 2.2.5 Vulnerability and ‘at risk’ groups

It has been noted that fuel poverty literature to date has extensively researched a number of ‘vulnerable’ groups within society (Harrington, Heyman, Merleau-Ponty, Stockton, Ritchie, & Heyman, 2005; Snell, Bevan & Thompson, 2015; Liddell, & Morris, 2010). In political discourse the term first emerged in the previous UK wide fuel poverty Strategy (2001), which introduced the ‘vulnerable’ as a subcategory of the fuel poor, outlining measures to eradicate fuel poverty among this group by 2010. Within this strategy, the vulnerable were defined as *“older householders, families with children, and householders who are disabled or suffering from a long-term illness”* (DTI, 2001, p.11).

However, the use of the term 'vulnerable' in the context of fuel poverty has been widely contested, and still is today, particularly within political discourse, where it has been asserted that its definition "*would benefit from some greater political transparency*" (Boardman, 2010, p.24). In particular, one critique regarding the ambiguity of the term questioned if the previous strategy in fact targeted those "*least able to afford their fuel costs*", or those most at risk of "*excess winter or summer mortality and morbidity*" (Boardman, 2010, p.6). To some extent, this issue was addressed in the recent Hills Review (2012) which aimed to explore the nature of fuel poverty, its causes, and impacts, and where, consequently, two broad definitions of 'vulnerability' were outlined. In this the authors distinguished vulnerability as either an increased likelihood to be living in or at risk of fuel poverty, or an increased vulnerability to the impacts of fuel poverty (Hills, 2012).

In broad terms, the literature review revealed that this distinction can usually be identified across much of the existing evidence base. Brought together, households which fall under either of the two broad definitions of the 'vulnerable fuel poor' are typically characterised within the literature as 'at risk' groups. Previous research has tended to focus on the nature of fuel poverty under one of these two definitions. Therefore, studies typically aim to generate a better understanding of the issue either among demographic groups that have been identified as disproportionately more likely to be fuel poor, such as young adult households, or those most severely impacted by fuel poverty, such as the elderly, lone-parent families with young children, those with disabilities or householders suffering with ill-health. Nevertheless, it has been noted that many households could be classified as vulnerable under both definitions, for example in an unemployed household

where one of the household members is disabled or suffering ill-health. In a similar manner, given that this research is focused on an 'at risk' or 'vulnerable' group in terms of likelihood to be living in fuel poverty, it will also be important to consider the 'vulnerability' of young adults in terms of the impacts of fuel poverty-related challenges. For example, are the experiences of young adult, lone-parent households different, and if so, how do these experiences differ?

In 2014, DECC commissioned a comprehensive review of existing research evidence, focusing on the attitudes and behaviours among households living in or at risk of fuel poverty regarding domestic energy use (DECC, 2014a). Understandably, given its infancy as a formal definition, no studies were identified in the review which had adopted the LIHC definition of fuel poverty. Remarkably, the authors also noted that, despite recognition as a formal definition of fuel poverty for more than two decades, very few studies have utilised the definition under the 10% indicator either. Consequently, the review was broadened to include research which has investigated fuel poverty among particular 'at risk' groups, where either a 'proxy' (i.e. low-income, receipt of a means-tested benefit) had been used to identify the fuel poor, or the study has focused on a particular vulnerable group (i.e. disabled households).

The use of proxy-based approaches in research has been criticised in that such strategies may often result in the inclusion of households which are not classified as fuel poor. For example, as the authors of the review highlight: *"as proxies do not explicitly identify people in fuel poverty – for example, not everyone living on a low income is fuel poor if they live in an energy efficient home – making conclusions from such research about the fuel poverty population is difficult"* (DECC, 2014a, p.8).

In contrast, however, it has been suggested that a realistic perspective must be adopted with regards to the benefits which can be offered by using proxy based approaches (Hills, 2012). For example, as noted earlier, the scale of conducting detailed household and building surveys, as well as individual household income assessments, in order to accurately identify and target all fuel poor households, would be “*prohibitively expensive*” and involve significant level of “*intrusiveness*” (Hills, 2012, p.73).

### 2.3 Fuel poverty and young adult households

It has been highlighted throughout this chapter that certain demographic groups, such as older households or those with a low income, have a higher than average propensity to be living in fuel poverty (DECC, 2014a). It has also been noted that when considering the levels of fuel poverty across households of different ages, young adult households – those where the oldest member is younger than 25 – are disproportionately more likely to be fuel poor than any other age group (DECC, 2015a). Despite statistical recognition of an increased risk, young adult households represent a demographic group that remain almost entirely absent from fuel poverty literature. Taking into account these two critical factors – a disproportionate risk related to household age and a lack of academic attention to date - this research was focused exclusively on the experiences of fuel poverty among young adult households.

As noted in the introduction, the literature review found only one study, to date, which has focused exclusively on fuel poverty among households where the oldest member is younger than 25. Conducted by Bouzarovski *et al.* (2013), the research concentrated on a densely populated urban area in England and aimed to “*explore the extent to which such*

*individuals suffer from fuel poverty as a result of moving out of the parental home, while identifying some of the main housing and social features of households in this group*" (Bouzarovski *et al.*, 2013, p.1). Employing a mixed methods approach, 320 surveys were completed, as well as 36 in-depth interviews with flat-sharing young adults, most of whom were students (68% of surveyed households). In addition, household temperatures and self-reported diaries were collected over a two week period.

One of the main findings drawn from the research highlighted that among young adult households there may be a failure to recognise or acknowledge that they are living in fuel poverty, despite substantial evidence that participants were living in such conditions. For example, the data revealed that many of the households were living with indoor temperatures below levels which are considered to be acceptable and in addition, more than half of the respondents reported the presence of damp or mould in their property (a key indicator of a cold and/or poorly insulated home). In this regard, the authors outlined that *"issues of recognition are central to understanding and addressing this group's susceptibility to domestic energy deprivation"* (p.1), suggesting that at a fundamental level, further research should aim to generate a greater understanding of underlying processes related to recognition and awareness in the context of fuel poverty.

In terms of the participants' experiences of fuel poverty-related challenges, Bouzarovski *et al.* (2013) identified a number of contributory factors, including: low levels of energy efficiency in properties typically rented by this age group (i.e. those within the private rented sector), exploitation by and poor relationships with landlords, bundling of rent and utility costs, and a lack of awareness regarding energy efficiency or fuel poverty assistance.



Investigating the extent to which this demographic group may experience fuel poverty, the researchers suggested that such experiences are “*contingent on everyday life practices, behaviours and attitudes*” (p.1). The participants, most of whom were students, often followed considerably different schedules on a day-to-day basis, which was often reflected in their experiences of irregular heating regimes and overall energy use. Focusing on flat-sharing young adults, the research also revealed a sense of compromise and reconciliation which had to be managed regarding the needs of other household members. Understanding the experiences of ‘flat sharing’ young adults – many of whom would be classed as living in a house in multiple occupation (HMO) - is of critical importance, particularly with regards to energy practices and energy-related challenges in the home. At present very little is known about fuel poverty among those living in HMOs; an area which has been highlighted by the Government as requiring further attention (DECC, 2015b).

Considering HMOs specifically, research has highlighted that, among non-student, professional house-sharers, notions of constraint and limitations are not typically experienced (Kenyon & Heath, 2001). However, Bouzarovski *et al.*'s (2013) study revealed contrasting findings in relation to energy use among young adult households in that participants disclosed that often their heating regimes *were* constrained or limited, in an effort to bring bills down to a level affordable for household members.

Bouzarovski *et al.*'s (2013) study drew a number of conclusions as to the reasons why there may be issues of recognition among young adults living in or at risk of fuel poverty. Firstly, the authors note that it has been widely documented within the literature that young people generally demonstrate a lack of awareness regarding energy efficient

behaviours, and the energy efficiency of the home (Carlsson-Kanyama, Lindén, & Eriksson, 2005; Lindén, Carlsson-Kanyama, & Eriksson, 2006). Secondly, a failure to recognise conditions indicative of fuel poverty may be influenced by “*widespread cultural expectation that it is acceptable for individuals to live in poorly heated and low quality housing at the entry point of their housing career*” (p.8). Another factor illustrated that, as tenants within the private rented sector, participants conveyed limited capacity to act regarding their situations (Bouzarovski *et al.*, 2013). Fuel poverty is significantly more prevalent across the private rented sector (DECC, 2015a), and research has highlighted that for such tenants there is little or no capacity to alter the energy performance of the property (Ambrose, 2015a; Middlemiss & Gillard, 2015).

Critically, these findings may illustrate key challenges for strategies which set out to alleviate or eradicate fuel poverty, whereby the potential to effectively target support towards this demographic group is restricted by issues related to a lack of recognition at the household level. Essentially, as noted in the introduction, if young adult households do not conceive of themselves as living in fuel poverty, a valid assumption may be that the likelihood of them actively seeking out or acknowledging assistance directed towards them is highly improbable. This challenge in effectively targeting support has been noted in previous research where it has been stated that one barrier to the take-up of fuel poverty assistance may be a result of confusion regarding eligibility (Dodds & Dobson, 2008). Further emphasising the challenge in targeting support, Bouzarovski *et al.* (2013) concluded, that this demographic group may represent a “*part of society that is invisible to fuel poverty assistance*” (p.9).

As this section highlights, to date very little is known about the nature or experiences of fuel poverty among young adult households. Bouzarovski et al's (2013) study presents critical and much needed preliminary insights into the plight of an underresearched demographic group in the context of fuel poverty; however a significant limitation is that is predominantly focused on student experiences. With students representing a very distinct group of urban young adults, it could be argued that even less is known about the nature or experiences of fuel poverty among young adult households who gain residential independence for reasons other than moving away to study. It is also important to take into account that generally students will have access to specific financial support in terms of student loans and grants. Comparing this to the lives of non-student young adult households, for whom previous research has highlighted a disproportionate likelihood to be unemployed or on a very low income (Ambrose *et al.*, 2015), the experiences of deprivation, including that of domestic energy, may be even more severe. In this regard, this research is intended to expand upon the limited understanding of fuel poverty among young adults, aiming to offer insights in to the experiences of an overlooked demographic group who are not necessarily students, or living in predominantly student areas.

## 2.4 Energy vulnerability

Recent commentary has 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, as noted earlier), demonstrating a tendency to draw upon definitions only in terms of 'macro-level indicators' (Middlemiss & Gillard, 2015). Valuable insights gained from a growing body of rich 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). Recent efforts, however, reframing fuel poverty discourse through terms such as ‘energy vulnerability’ (Bouzarovski, 2013; Middlemiss & Gillard, 2013) have 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.

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 and the findings from a piece of qualitative research which focused on the lived experience of fuel poverty, Middlemiss and Gillard (2015) proposed a clear definition of energy vulnerability. From this, ‘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).*

Essentially, this definition allows for 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 how different households may have varying degrees of vulnerability to fuel poverty in terms of their “*exposure, sensitivity and adaptive capacity*” (Middlemiss & Gillard, 2015, p.147). In the one study to have focused on fuel poverty among young adults, it was outlined by the authors that due to the “*fluid nature of housing and everyday*

*practices*” (Bouzarovski *et al.*, 2013, p.8) among young adult households, 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. Adopting a more fluid understanding, which therefore appreciates the changing nature of fuel poverty, has also been noted with regards to effectively targeting support and consequently achieving the measures set out in the new fuel poverty strategy. As Hills (2012) notes:

*“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 of young adult households. In this way, considering the definition 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. Put simply, the aim of this research is not to identify whether or not a sample of young adult households are, by formal definition, living in fuel poverty, but it is actually an attempt to explore the ways in which they construct and make sense of their relationship with domestic energy, which inevitably may include fuel-poverty related challenges and vulnerabilities.

### 2.4.1 Challenges to energy vulnerability

In addition to presenting a definition, Middlemiss and Gillard (2015) identified six key *“challenges to energy vulnerability for the fuel poor”* (ibid, p.146). These included: quality of dwelling, energy costs and supply, stability of household income, tenancy relations, social relations within the household and outside, and ill health. The authors note that while some of the six identified challenges have previously received significant attention within the literature, albeit perhaps under different terms, this framework differs in that it offers a *“comprehensive bottom-up reframing of the top down perspective”* (ibid, p.152).

One challenge, which may be particularly important to consider among fuel poor young adult households, is stability of household income. In Middlemiss and Gillard’s (2015) research it was highlighted that many of their participants, as members of low income households, were reliant on state benefits and/or in low-paid employment. As a consequence, there were substantial concerns regarding existing and proposed changes to the welfare system, such as the threat of delays or sanctions to benefit payments, as well as the damaging impact on managing income caused by the introduction of the *“bedroom tax”* (Shelter, 2015).

For households where the oldest member is younger than 25, this vulnerability or sensitivity may be intensified. DECC have noted that one reason young adult households have a higher than average propensity to be living in fuel poverty is due to low income (DECC, 2015a). For those in employment, figures from the English Housing Survey have highlighted that households within this age group have the lowest average weekly income

(DCLG, 2015a). This vulnerability is greater for young adults in receipt of a work replacement benefit, such as jobseekers allowance, where the applicable amount paid is approximately 20% less than for those aged over 25 (Rights Net, 2015). Research examining 'tenancy failure' among young adult households has previously emphasised such income-related challenges highlighting that 'young tenants', particularly those under the age of 25, face a disproportionate risk of being unemployed or living on extremely low incomes (Ambrose *et al.*, 2015b). Worryingly, the study found that single men aged 21-25 years-old were at the greatest risk of facing eviction and dealing with rent arrears (Ambrose *et al.*, 2015b). While not explicitly discussed in terms of fuel poverty, the authors highlight how precarious incomes and housing are interlinked with energy-related challenges in that the findings document the difficulties faced by young adult households when trying to cover essential costs such as rent, food and domestic energy (Ambrose *et al.*, 2015b).

Furthermore, in focusing on the six identified challenges to energy vulnerability, Middlemiss and Gillard's (2015) research also attempted to investigate ways in which such conditions might be alleviated. The authors highlighted that many of the proposed strategies in attempting to ameliorate energy vulnerability were *"heavily reliant on structural changes, rather than on the agency of the household itself"* (Middlemiss & Gillard, 2015, p.147). These findings have been similarly highlighted in earlier research where often households have very limited capacity to act, in terms of making 'structural changes', as in physical changes to buildings, which may result in improved energy efficiency of the home (Ambrose, 2015a; DECC, 2015a). For those who own their own home, efforts to improve the energy efficiency of the property are often prohibitively

expensive. Where costly home improvements are an issue for owner occupiers, for those who are tenants across the social housing or private rented sector, a barrier to change is often determined by key intermediaries, such as the landlord or housing provider, where failure to improve the condition of the property has been frequently documented.

#### 2.4.2 Energy vulnerability and young adult households

In the research conducted by Middlemiss and Gillard (2015), seventeen in-depth interviews were completed with a sample representing a diverse demographic. Participants were from a broad range of age groups and formed various household compositions. Monthly household income also varied, as well as the maximum percentage of income reported by participants as spent on fuel.

A major limitation of Middlemiss and Gillard's (2015) study, with regard to the present research, is that the sample only included one participant who potentially represented a young adult household (falling within the age range of 20-29 years old so not necessarily under the age of 25). Critically, this participant reported the lowest percentage of household income spent on fuel – in fact, with a maximum of 3%, this figure was significantly lower than those reported by any other participant (ranging from 3%-50%). However, despite disclosing substantially lower levels of household expenditure spent on fuel, it isn't clear whether this indicates a less severe experience of energy vulnerability. In this regard, a number of interpretations, concerning the experiences of energy vulnerability among young adults, could be drawn. Firstly, the 3% figure could indicate that the household had low levels of energy use, and that this was sufficient for household needs – perhaps due to the participant and her family living in a small property. Secondly,



the figure could indicate that the household had low levels of energy use, but that this was perceived as insufficient. Thirdly, the figure disclosed may have been an inaccurate calculation from the householder regarding the total household expenditure spent on fuel.

Essentially, what this illustrates is that while Middlemiss and Gillard's (2015) analysis of energy vulnerability may have included the perspective of one young adult household, this can't be known for sure and very little can be inferred from the findings in terms of energy vulnerability among young adult households. While recognising that the research conducted by Middlemiss and Gillard's (2015) was not intended to focus on a specific demographic group, this highlights a current gap in the existing evidence base: what can be known about the nature and experiences of energy vulnerability among young adult households? This is, in part, a question in which the present research aims to address.

## 2.5 Understanding the relationship with energy

Given that young adult households may not conceive of themselves as living in or at risk of fuel poverty (Bouzarovski *et al.*, 2013), this research aims to consider more broadly the way in which such households construct and make sense of their relationship with domestic energy (i.e. gas and electricity). This exploration is not only concerned with the various ways in which energy is used (i.e. heating, lighting, cooking, entertainment, etc.) and paid for, but also the ways in which energy-related narratives may expose experiences of related challenges and vulnerabilities. As noted earlier, efforts to reframe fuel poverty discourse away from the traditional 'binary thinking', using terms such as 'energy vulnerability', may have the "*potential to open up a more complex and dynamic*

*understanding of people's relationship with energy*" (Middlemiss and Gillard, 2015, p.146). Therefore, in this regard, it is important to consider what characterises a household's relationship with domestic energy.

### 2.5.1 Energy uses

One of the predominant ways in which a householder's relationship with energy may be understood is in terms of the way energy is *used* in the home. With a substantial evidence base documenting the relationship between cold homes and ill-health, it is unsurprising that fuel poverty literature has largely focused on experiences of cold homes and has therefore concentrated on energy uses with regards to space heating. However, a growing body of work has considered domestic energy deprivation beyond heating regimes, also looking more broadly at deprivation of energy services (Bouzarovski, Petrova & Tirado-Herrero, 2014; Pachauri, & Spreng, 2004; Buzar, 2007).

Understanding an individual's relationship with energy, with regards to energy services, involves *"thinking about energy in terms of the domestic functions that it affords"* (Bouzarovski, Petrova & Tirado-Herrero, 2014, p.5), with energy services including: *"space heating, water heating, space cooling, refrigeration, cooking, drying, lighting, electronic services, and appliance services"* (p.5).

In Bouzarovski *et al.*'s (2013) research, which focused on fuel poverty among flat-sharing young adult households, the emergent findings mostly concentrated on the experiences of and responses to cold homes. The findings revealed that participants, where possible, would bring energy costs down to the lowest possible level and this, at times, would result in some household members not using heating system when cold. However, the analysis

revealed little discussion regarding energy services (beyond heating practices) among young adult households. In particular, it is unclear if certain energy consuming activities are perceived as taking priority over others and what factors are influential in such processes of prioritisation. For example, it may be critical for the present research to consider if households reduce their heating practices in order to ensure that energy resources can be directed towards other energy uses, such as cooking, lighting or even entertainment in the home.

### 2.5.2 Energy efficiency

Another way in which energy research has focused on the relationship between individuals and domestic energy uses is by exploring practices and processes regarding energy efficiency. Energy efficiency can be thought of either in terms of the behaviours of householders or the energy performance of the properties in which they live; both of which have direct consequences for the experiences of fuel poverty. For fuel poor households, increased energy efficiency, in both senses, provides a number of benefits, including reduced energy costs, a warmer home, improved health outcomes, and the potential to utilise more rooms across the house (DECC, 2014a). *“Energy used in homes accounts for more than a quarter of carbon dioxide emissions in Great Britain”* (Hards, 2013, p.438); therefore, in terms of household emissions, increased energy efficiency is also of significant importance in terms of achieving climate change targets.

One way in which households may construct or make sense of their relationship with energy may be with regards to energy efficient behaviours or the energy efficiency of their home. There has been limited engagement in the literature with the knowledge and

perceptions of energy efficiency among households living in or at risk of fuel poverty and where research has been conducted it has largely focused on householders' limited awareness of or engagement with energy efficiency programmes (DECC, 2014a).

Recently, a number of studies have begun to investigate the role of stigma in relation to energy efficient behaviours (Hards, 2013; Reid, McKee, & Crawford, 2015). One such study examined how household behaviours (i.e. domestic energy practices) may be '*status-enhancing*' or '*stigmatising*' (Hards, 2013, p.438). In this regard, the authors outlined that energy efficient household behaviours had the potential to enhance one's perception of their own pro-environmental status. Conversely, the research identified a "*risk of stigma attached to certain energy practices*" (Hards, 2013, p.449), such as use of the heating systems. Participants demonstrated an awareness of stigmatisation and went on to disclose personal strategies for managing it. By revealing an awareness of social approval or disapproval, these findings illustrate that features of an individual's relationship with energy, particularly in terms of energy efficiency, are rooted in wider social and cultural understandings.

For young adult households, many of whom will be experiencing independent household management for the first time, the perceptions of how different energy-related household behaviours can be socially *approving* or *disapproving* may have a significant impact on the way in which energy is used in the home. With regard to the present research, a key consideration here may be to examine in greater detail the underlying motivations for energy practices to establish if a perceived risk of stigmatisation occurs. For example, when is it deemed appropriate to use the household's heating system, and why at these times?

### 2.5.3 Energy supply, costs, and billing

In the UK, domestic energy (i.e. gas and electricity) is paid for using one of three methods: prepayment meter (PPM), monthly direct debit or a standing credit charge. Another way in which a household's relationship with energy may be characterised is in terms of the relationship individuals have with energy suppliers, as well as the billing practices involved in covering energy costs. Government figures have highlighted that fuel poverty is consistently more prevalent among households who pay fuel bills using a PPM (DECC, 2015b), and in Salford in particular, the number of households using this payment method is much higher than the national average (Citizens Advice, 2015b; Citizens Advice 2015c). To some extent, the increased prevalence of PPM's across the city may exacerbate the levels and experiences of fuel poverty for those living in Salford (where as noted earlier, as many as one in four households are estimated to be fuel poor). However, while factors such a payment method can be understood as contributory, these should not overlook the main drivers of fuel poverty, which, as stated earlier within the chapter, are fundamentally understood as a triad of energy inefficient homes, high energy costs and low-incomes.

Considering how domestic energy is paid for, aspects of a household's relationship with energy might also be thought of in terms of their relationship with energy suppliers, and the billing practices propagated by such companies. Energy billing in particular has received much criticism, with energy suppliers being labelled as the "*worst offenders*" for producing confusing household bills (Martinelli, 2014), despite enforced efforts to improve the situation:

*“Ofgem introduced a number of changes aimed at making the energy market easier for customers to understand. Part of these rules focused on making energy bills clearer and more transparent. Changes included adding a personal projection (an estimate of what their energy tariff will cost over the course a year) as well as listing any cheaper plans on offer by their energy supplier. However, these changes have not had the impact Ofgem was hoping to for and just 30% of consumers claim their bills are easier to read following the changes. An additional 51% had not noticed anything on their bill highlighting cheaper energy plans on offer by their supplier.”* (Martinelli, 2014).

Negative experiences with energy bills have been outlined as a key factor for poor engagement with the energy market overall, leading to less than one in five low income households switching to potentially cheaper tariffs as a result of living in a cold home (Anderson & White, 2010). Critically, this is regarded as a consequence of high levels of confusion and *“scepticism about the opportunities offered by the energy market”* (Anderson, White & Finney, 2010, p.4).

Interestingly, research has highlighted a stark contrast between consumers’ engagement with the ‘energy market’ compared to the ‘food market’ (Anderson, White & Finney, 2010). In terms of decision making processes, among low income households, regarding food provision, such households rarely went hungry or without food, and instead *“shopped around, sought out bargains, opted for tinned rather than fresh food and cut down on their meat intake”* (ibid, p.24) demonstrating a *“close and active engagement with the food market”* (ibid, p.4). Conversely, in terms of energy provision, it has been highlighted that households are rarely *shopping around*. This has particularly severe

implications for those using a PPM, where there is significantly fewer options available in terms of how to pay energy costs and the variability of tariffs available (Citizens Advice, 2015d).

#### 2.5.4 Coping with cold homes and energy-related challenges

This section of the literature review has aimed to generate a better understanding of the ways in which householders may experience a relationship with domestic energy in the home. As this research is also concerned with experiences of fuel poverty- and energy-related challenges and vulnerabilities, it is important to consider how households understand this relationship in times of hardship, or, in other words, how they utilise mechanisms of coping to respond to such challenges. A substantial body of work has investigated the coping mechanisms and behaviours of households experiencing cold homes and fuel poverty (Gibbons & Singler, 2008; Anderson, White and Finney, 2010; Liddell & Morris, 2010; Harrington *et al.*, 2005), and research has identified that behavioural strategies among individuals living in fuel poverty vary greatly (Brunner, Spitzer & Christanell, 2012). In broad terms, mechanisms for coping with low incomes and a cold home have been categorised into three general approaches: using less fuel than is needed to attain a level of thermal comfort, reducing expenditure on other essential items or 'going without', and incurring debt (Gibbons & Singler, 2008). The following three sections will discuss each of these approaches in greater detail.

##### *(a) Reducing fuel use*

One of the most common strategies employed by households attempting to *cope* with living in a cold home is to reduce overall fuel use, consequently reducing fuel costs. The

Office for National Statistics reported that between 2005 and 2011 there was a 22.3% reduction in average household energy consumption (ONS, 2013), and as Middlemiss and Gillard (2015) assert *“the doubling of energy prices for households during this period must have had a substantial effect”* (p.146). Research has highlighted that, among young adult households in particular, almost one in four will cut back on fuel use because of the level of concern energy costs cause (Harris, Hall, Meltzer, Jenkins, Oreszczyn, & McManus, 2010).

Specifically, a significant number of households cut back on their use of the heating systems as a means of reducing fuel use, and therefore compromising the household's thermal comfort (Anderson, White and Finney, 2010). Where such compromises have been made, a number of substituting behaviours have been identified in the literature. These behaviours make attempts to achieve some level of warmth and comfort within the home, with such actions including: wearing more clothing, only heating the main living areas or one room, heating children's rooms only, and using alternative heating systems (e.g. portable electric heaters) (ibid, 2010).

However, cutting back on fuel use as a coping mechanism has similarly been identified among low-income households living properties considered to be energy efficient (Anderson, White and Finney, 2010). The authors concluded that, for some households, the thermal performance of the property appeared to have no significant impact on their decision to adopt this coping strategy, and, actually, concerns regarding high fuel costs were more of a motivation. This illustrates that the cost of fuel represents a key concern among low-income households, even those living in energy efficient properties, and that



the psychological concern caused by energy bills is substantial enough to trigger certain coping strategies.

*(b) Going without other necessities*

As Boardman described, “*fuel poverty is a recognised social problem which affects the poor*” (Boardman, 2010, p.1). Low-income fuel poor households, in particular, face difficult decisions in terms of how best to allocate limited financial means, often requiring complex budgeting strategies. Within the context of fuel poverty, a critical example of this often refers to the dilemma termed ‘heat or eat’, whereby households find themselves in a position in which they must compromise on either adequate food or fuel provision.

Research looking specifically at coping strategies employed by those living in cold homes found that while a significant number of households evidenced experiences of the ‘heat or eat’ dilemma, it was not only food provision that was reduced (Anderson, White & Finney, 2010). Other outgoings which fuel poor households forewent included, among others: purchasing new, rather than second hand, clothing and shoes; replacing furniture and other household appliances; and holidays, hobbies and socialising.

Of considerable importance to the context of this research, a previous study found that among young adult, low-income parent households, heating was often prioritised in order to ensure the good health of the children living in the household (Harrington et al, 2004). This highlights a key example of the processes of negotiation which young adult households who are also parents face with regards to managing their energy uses. However, as a result of the gap in existing knowledge, in this regard very little is known. The present research has the potential to shed light on how young adult households manage and negotiate their energy uses, which may highlight coping strategies employed

specifically by this age group. As a result of better understanding such perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours, opportunities in terms of how to best to target and deliver support may be revealed.

*(c) Incurring debt*

In the UK, there are approximately 1.5 million electricity and 1.4 million gas accounts in debt (Ofgem, 2014). In a time of rising fuel costs the ability to avoid household debt, primarily energy debts, is becoming increasingly difficult, particularly among low-income households. As Boardman (2010) notes:

*“Those on fixed (low) incomes (especially benefit claimants and pensioners) are unlikely to be able to increase their spending on fuel to compensate, or perhaps at all. In the short term, their only option is to reduce fuel consumption or go into debt”*

(Boardman, 2010, p.88)

A serious cause for concern has been highlighted by research studying specifically the impact of energy debts on families and children (Williams, Royston, Ayre & Royston, 2015). Research findings have illustrated that as many as one in ten children living in a household with energy debts found it consistently too cold to sleep in their room at night (ibid). Furthermore, children living in households with energy debts were three times more likely to suffer ill health during the winter months, and, for parents, high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression were reported. As a result, family relationships between those in households with energy debt suffered.

Further demonstrating poor relationships between households and energy suppliers, the authors highlighted how participants disclosed a sense of *“losing control”* (ibid, p.26), and

*“of things ‘being done to’ families rather than it being a two way conversation”* (ibid, p.26). As the present research aims to generate a better understanding of the ways in which young adult households make sense of their relationship with energy, it may be important, in part, to explore how the relationship with energy suppliers is constructed and made sense of. As young adults are typically at an entry point in their housing careers, and therefore will have limited experience in dealing with energy suppliers, this may highlight particular opportunities for adopting more proactive approaches in avoiding energy debts among younger households. Some key question which may need to be considered might include: as new energy customers, how competent or adequately supported do young adult households feel with regards to their understanding of energy costs and the billing processes involved? Do energy suppliers, or other organisations, offer appropriate support where needed? How could energy billing be explained or presented more clearly?

Understanding the experiences of debt, including energy debts, is of critical importance among young adult households. As well as enduring some of the poorest housing conditions and living within severely restricted financial means, the highest levels of household debt have been reported among those aged under twenty-five. Excluding student loans or mortgages, recent statistics revealed that almost half of those aged 18-25 have personal debts, owing on average approximately £3000 each (Go Compare, 2015). Worryingly, according to the ‘Wealth and Assets Survey’ conducted by the ONS (2015c), the median level of personal debt among this demographic group has more than doubled in less than a decade.

## 2.6 Young adulthood and the independent home

Until this point, the literature review has predominantly focused on the context of fuel poverty, as well as introducing the recently established concept of energy vulnerability as a way of further understanding the experiences of the fuel poor. However, as this research is directly concerned with the lived experience of a specific demographic group - that is young adult households aged 18-25 years-old – it will be important to consider what characterises and distinguishes this stage in an individual's life.

Furthermore, fuel poverty is a social problem which is specifically experienced within the context of the home. While many young adults aged under 25 may not yet have experiences of living independently, this study is specifically concerned with those young adults who could be classed as independent energy users and energy consumers. Therefore, in order to better understand how young adults construct and make sense of their relationship with energy in this way, as well as energy related challenges and vulnerabilities, it is necessary to direct a certain level of focus towards their experiences of living independently and managing the independent home.

### 2.6.1 Emerging adulthood

Between the ages of 18 and 25 years-old, an individual's life consumed by experiences of profound change. Often, it is during this time that major transitions will be experienced, such as finishing education, moving into full-time employment, establishing lasting and often more meaningful relationships with others, as well as acquiring financial independence (Hopkins, 2006). Another major transition typically experienced during this

period, and one of critical importance to this research, is that of leaving the parental home and consequently gaining independence in terms of residential status.

Arnett (2000) has noted, however, that, in terms of establishing a sense of 'adulthood', many of these critical transitions actually play a subordinate role. Of greater importance are individualistic qualities of character, such as "*accepting responsibility for one's self*", "*making independent decisions*", and "*becoming financially independent*" (Arnett, 2000, p.473). Notably, all three of these higher ranking qualities have a critical role in understanding the lived experience of managing the independent home, as well as energy-related experiences as independent household members.

An interesting finding from research which has explored the subjective conceptualisations of young adults regarding their worldviews, found that, "*many of them see the condition of the world as grim and are pessimistic about the future of their society*" (Arnett, 2000, p.474); however, in narrating personal perspectives regarding their own futures, young adults overwhelmingly demonstrate a strong sense of optimism. In a previous study, 96% of 18- to 24-year olds interviewed in the US agreed with the statement, "*I am very sure that someday I will get to where I want to be in life*" (ibid). This is significant in that a key finding from Bouzarovski *et al's* (2013) study highlights that young adults may fail to recognise that they are living in or at risk of fuel poverty. It is conceivable that these two findings interplay. That is to say, it is possible that the strong sense of optimism displayed by young adults plays an influential role in their understanding of the relationship between themselves and fuel poverty.

## 2.6.2 Leaving and Making Home

Young adulthood, in particular, is a period where individuals are likely to have significant experiences of residential change. Regarded as a *“complex process rather than a one-off event”* (Hopkins, 2010, p.107), a key transition is that from the parental home to the independent home, and is one which can occur for a variety of reasons. Research has highlighted that often, this complex transition can, in fact, involve a return (to the parental home); for example, where young adults have finished university. Jones (as cited in Hopkins, 2010) identified four different groups of young people, which she categorised as: supported returners; unsupported returners; supported independence; and unsupported independence. These categories illustrate that the experiences of leaving the parental home differ greatly between young adults in that some receive more support than others (predominantly from parents or caregivers), whether returning to the parental home or not. For the present research, it may be important to understand to what extent (if any) the level of support young adults receive has an impact upon their experiences of managing the home, including their role as an independent energy consumer.

It has been highlighted that much of the research focused on young people and housing has been concerned with the transition itself, however as Hopkins (2010) notes: *“a very important aspect of young people’s lives is often the experience of ‘making home’ and the practices and processes associated with this”* (p.111). However, to date, there has been very little engagement in the literature with the concept of ‘making home’. Such *practices* and *processes* could include establishing a sense of independence and one’s identity as an independent household member through, for example, activities such as decorating or

buying furniture. However, also within the concept of 'making home', it will be important to consider how individuals establish and sustain a sense of comfort in the home. Implicit in this is their understanding and experiences of thermal comfort and adequate domestic energy provision. This therefore suggests that through a greater understanding of the concept of 'making home', it might be possible to gain valuable insights into young adult households' relationship with energy, as well as the experiences of energy- or fuel-related challenges and vulnerabilities.

### 2.6.3 Generation Rent

As noted earlier, DECC have regarded higher levels of fuel poverty among young adult households, in part, as a consequence of them living in some of the poorest and most energy inefficient housing, predominantly across the private rented sector (DECC, 2015a). Consistently over the last decade, properties from within this sector have been reported to have the worst energy performance ratings, compared to any other tenure type (DCLG, 2015a), and are understood as some of the most expensive properties to heat.

The options available to the majority of young adult households, in terms of the tenure they choose to live in, are severely restricted. Purchasing a property is becoming increasingly difficult, and less common, in part due to the large deposits typically required. Government reports have highlighted the unaffordability of house buying for young adults, noting that the number of first time buyers aged between 16-24 years-old fell from 14% to 9% between 2002/3 and 2012/13, while levels among other age groups remained stable (DCLG, 2015a). Termed '*generation rent*' (Dorling, 2014), those aged 18-25 years-old, and in fact increasing numbers of older age groups also, have little option but to move

into, or remain within, the rented sector across privately rented properties and social housing. However, with almost two million people waiting for a social home, many individuals and families are forced into privately rented properties (Shelter, 2015), and therefore face the challenges associated with the most energy inefficient properties in the UK.

## 2.7 Introducing the research questions

Fundamentally, this research aims to respond to two key issues highlighted within the literature review. The first is that fuel poverty affects a disproportionate number of young adult households compared to any other age group (DECC, 2015a). Secondly, despite Government figures highlighting the significant risk faced by this demographic group in terms of fuel poverty, it has received very little academic attention to date.

Considering the one study which has focused on fuel poor young adult households (Bouzarovski *et al.*, 2013), one of the main conclusions highlighted that at the centre of the issue there may be a failure among young adults to recognise or acknowledge household conditions indicative of fuel poverty. Given this finding, the present research aimed to look more broadly at the experiences of living independently and managing the independent home.

A major limitation of Bouzarovski *et al.*'s (2015) research, however, is that it is predominantly concerned with the experiences of fuel poverty among students, who represent a very distinct group of urban young adults. It can be argued that while very little is known about fuel poverty among young adult students, even less is known



regarding the experiences of non-student, fuel poor young adults, many of whom may be among some of the most vulnerable households in the UK.

The literature review has also highlighted that among young adults there is also a disproportionate risk to be among those on the lowest incomes (Ambrose *et al.*, 2015b), whether as a result of low-paid and unstable employment or unemployed and in receipt of lower rates of work-replacement benefits (Rights Net, 2015). Exacerbating this vulnerability even further is an increased likelihood to be living in some of the most energy inefficient homes, which are therefore among some of the most expensive to heat (DECC, 2015a).

In England, there have been substantial changes to fuel poverty policy since 2012, and these were discussed in *Section 2.2*. The most significant of which has resulted in the introduction of a new measure of fuel poverty under the LIHC indicator (Hills, 2012). Despite receiving praise for its ability to examine not only the number of fuel poor households but also the depth and severity of the issue, the LIHC, and specifically the 'fuel poverty gap', has been criticised for failing to take into account the level of energy costs which households may consider to be 'reasonable' and 'affordable' (Moore *et al.*, 2012). For the present research, the fuel poverty gap presents serious issues in that it suggests that while young adult households are most likely to be living in fuel poverty, the severity of the issue for them is not as severe as with other age groups (DECC, 2015a).

As highlighted in *Section 2.4*, it has been argued that fuel poverty has drawn too heavily on statistical representations of the issue, such as the fuel poverty gap (Middlemiss & Gillard, 2015). The present research aims to move away from such statistical

representations by adopting a qualitative approach that focuses on the lived experience of fuel poverty. This has been discussed in detail in *Section 2.4*, where the concept of energy vulnerability is introduced. Essentially, as defined by Middlemiss and Gillard (2015), energy vulnerability allows for 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 how different households may have varying degrees of vulnerability to fuel poverty. This is a critical consideration for the present research, where it may be important to consider the changing nature of fuel poverty for young adult households. As highlighted by Bouzarovski *et al.* (2015), young adults' lives are often consumed by profound experiences of transience and precariousness, which may also be significant with regard to the experiences of energy.

Furthermore, it was highlighted that by reframing fuel poverty through concepts such as energy vulnerability there may be the "*potential to open up a more complex and dynamic understanding of people's relationship with energy*" (Middlemiss & Gillard, 2015, p.147), Understanding the relationship with energy from a householder's perspective is challenging due to the very nature of subjectivity. What constitutes this relationship and how it is experienced and made sense of can change across various points in time and across different contexts. The literature review attempted to explore key aspects of this relationship by focusing on a range of factors such as the way in which energy is used, conserved, and paid for, as well as the mechanisms of coping with energy deprivation. This was discussed in *Section 2.5*, and illustrated that, for the present research, it is critical to focus on the context of the independent home and how, within young adults'

experiences of independently managing the home, they construct and make sense of their relationship with energy.

In addition, efforts to generate a better understanding of a household's relationship with energy, particularly among demographic groups such as young adults where at present very little is known, have the potential to shed light on how best to target and deliver support.

This section has summarised the main findings from the literature review. Based on these, four research questions have been formed and can be found in the table below (*Table 2.1*).

*Table 2.1: The Research Questions*

- |   |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How do young adults describe their experiences of living independently and in what contexts do these experiences occur (for example, tenure type and household formation)?</li><li>• How do young adults construct and make sense of their experiences of managing the home independently, and within these experiences how do they reflect on their relationship with energy?</li><li>• What is the nature of young adults' perceptions, attitudes and experiences of energy vulnerability?</li><li>• What are the specific support needs of young adult households, in terms of fuel poverty and energy vulnerability, and how can support be better tailored to their needs?</li></ul> |
|---|

## Chapter Three: Methods

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter will introduce and outline the methodological approach adopted for the research. The chapter begins by situating the decision to adopt a qualitative methodology in the context of existing fuel poverty research. Next, an overview of the research design is given, which is followed, in brief, by a section highlighting the role of ethics. Following this, the design and development of the data collection tool, the 'interview guide', is detailed.

The next two sections move the focus of the chapter towards the participants, first discussing participant recruitment, which as noted, was conducted within a local branch of Salford Citizens Advice, and next, outlining the sampling criteria and sampling strategy used. The chapter then discusses the process of data collection which took the form of qualitative interviewing with six urban young adults. The final two sections focus on *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (IPA) as a research approach, outlining the analytic procedure followed. Lastly, the major themes to emerge from the analysis are presented, before moving on to detailed discussions of the findings in the following two chapters.

### 3.2 Research approach

This research set out to explore the lived experience of a specific and as yet under-researched (Bouzarovski *et al.*, 2013) demographic group – namely young adults, aged 18-25 years-old who independently manage their own home. Focusing on their lived experience as independent household members, a central aim was to identify and analyse

the ways in which young adults present aspects of their relationship with domestic energy (i.e. gas and electricity), as well as attending to energy-related challenges or vulnerabilities that may emerge from the participants' narrative accounts.

As noted in the literature review, valuable insights gained from a growing body of rich qualitative research remain largely absent from both academic and policy debate (Harrington *et al.*, 2005; Middlemiss & Gillard, 2013; Middlemiss & Gillard, 2015). As this research was concerned with the *"complex and dynamic understanding of people's relationship with energy"* (Middlemiss & Gillard, 2015, p.1), focusing specifically on the lived experience of young adult households, a qualitative methodology was considered most appropriate. Mason (2002) describes qualitative research as *"characteristically exploratory, fluid and flexible, data driven and context sensitive"* (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); in this case, from the perspective of urban young adults.

### 3.3 Research Design

Experiential accounts of urban young adults who had recent or present experiences of independently managing a home were recorded, transcribed and analysed using IPA. Data was generated using qualitative interviewing which, regarded as a *"conversation with a purpose"* (Burgess, 1984, p.84), is one of the most common methodological techniques used in qualitative research (Mason, 2002). Often defined as semi-structured or 'loosely structured' (ibid), adopting this technique is said to provide the researcher with *"the means to access and explore subjective experience"* (Sullivan, Gibson & Riley, 2012, p.104).

Importance is assigned to the ‘depth’, ‘complexity’ and ‘roundedness’ of data, in a stark contrast to structured methods, such as questionnaires, which have been characterised as “*broad surveys of surface patterns*” (Mason, 1996, p.41). Interactions between the interviewer and the interviewee were ‘guided’ by a loosely structured questionnaire designed to address emergent themes pertinent to the research questions. The development of the interview guide will be discussed in more detail in *Section 3.5* of this chapter.

The research was completed over an eleven month period; an overview of the time schedule is presented in the table below (see *Table 3.1*).

*Table 3.1 Time schedule of the research*

Time	Activity
Dec – Feb 2015	Review of existing literature Development of research aims, questions and methodological approach
Feb – Mar 2015	Ethics application submitted First draft of interview guide
April 2015	Ethical approval granted Development of interview guide Participant recruitment
May – Jun 2015	Data collection <sup>2</sup> : four interviews completed in May and two interviews completed in June
Jun – Jul 2015	Transcription Data analysis
Aug 2015	Thesis write-up
Nov 2015	Thesis submission

<sup>2</sup> Data collection was conducted during the summer months due to the time period over which the whole research degree was completed. Methodological considerations, including the timing of data collection, will be discussed in ‘Chapter Six: Conclusions’.

### 3.4 Ethics

In accordance with 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 Governance and Ethics Committee (*Appendix 1*). As participant recruitment was conducted at Salford Citizens Advice, organisational agreement was also obtained (*Appendix 2*).

Participants' right to withdraw was upheld and the researcher gained informed written or recorded verbal consent prior to participation (*Appendix 3*). Pseudonyms were allocated to ensure anonymity and all interviewees were made aware that should they wish to withdraw their contribution at any stage of the research, they could do so without giving a reason and without consequence.

### 3.5 Developing the interview guide

Qualitative data generated through semi-structured interviews is typically guided by an 'interview agenda' (Willig, 2001). In contrast to the rigid and pre-determined format of structured-interviews or surveys, most commonly employed in quantitative methods, the questions formulated in the design of a semi-structured or qualitative interview serve as a discursive guide to the interviewer, working to ensure the 'purpose' of the conversation is sustained. Flexibility is maintained, insofar as the questions included are not perceived as scripted requisite for all interviews, allowing for potential aspects of experience, not previously considered by the researcher, the freedom to emerge. In this way, the qualitative researcher strives to achieve a balance between 'researcher-led questions' and 'participant-led issues' (Sullivan, Gibson & Riley, 2012).

Characteristically consisting of a small number of open-ended questions, Mason (1996) calls for a “*thematic, topic-centred, biological or narrative approach*” in developing the interview guide. This approach avoids the use of a ‘structured list’ of questions, instead presenting interviewees with topics, themes or issues relevant to the research questions. Drawing upon the literature, six broad discussion areas, or ‘themes’, were included in the final interview guide (*Appendix 4*), which invited the participants to discuss their attitudes, perceptions and experiences regarding:

1. the broader area or community in which they live;
2. the practical, structural and social dynamics of their independent homes;
3. their perceptions and experiences of living independently;
4. the financial aspects (i.e. income and essential household costs) of managing the home;
5. domestic energy services, uses and billing practices;
6. outlook for the future; for themselves, their households and the local community.

During the development of the interview guide, attention was assigned to the order of the discussion which placed broader, more open questions at the beginning and end of each interview. Each discussion area was supported by a set of ‘prompts’ or sub-questions which served only as an aid to the researcher and not as a list of pre-determined questions to be answered by all participants in each interview. However, in addition to the interview guide, a short questionnaire was created to capture key socio-demographic data, such as age, tenure type, domestic fuel suppliers, and method of payment, and so on.



Willig (2001) notes a significant challenge faced by qualitative researchers involves identifying the *“right balance between maintaining control of the interview and where it is going, and allowing the interviewee the space to re-define the topic under investigation”* (p.22). In this regard, careful considerations - and reconsiderations throughout research design and data collection - were afforded to the content and structure of the interview. Supervision meetings held during the initial stages of data collection were organised with the intended focus of evaluating and reflecting on the process to date. This provided the opportunity to discuss early interpretations of the data and to review the efficacy of the interview guide as a data generation tool. As key findings, themes or issues emerged the question guide in its existing form was reviewed and where deemed appropriate was adapted. This primarily involved the inclusion or removal of specific prompts or sub-questions, though very few modifications were made.

In particular, two notable changes are worth mentioning. The first involved the inclusion of a positive question regarding the participants' experiences of living independently (i.e. *‘what are the benefits of living independently?’*). This amendment aimed to address, in part, any issues of balance between questions focused on negative and positive experiences; therefore working to manage and address any pre-conceived assumptions that such experiences would be in part or wholly negative. Secondly, in an effort to explore the presence or absence of support networks and to better understand which, if any, social actors fulfilled such roles, a sub-question was included which prompted participants to discuss their strategies in times of crisis (for example *“where do you turn to in a time of crisis and why here?”*).

### 3.6 Participant Recruitment

As outlined in the introduction, participant recruitment was carried out within a local branch of the national advice organisation: Citizens Advice. Research posters (*Appendix 5*) were displayed in the general waiting area and in each of the private consultancy rooms at the Salford City bureau. The decision to display posters in private spaces was considered an important aspect of participant recruitment, giving those individuals who may wish to participate in the research but did not want to show an interest publicly, the opportunity to do so. This has been noted in the literature as critically important where participant recruitment is conducted in public spaces, particularly in those such as a local Citizens Advice bureau, where the reason for attending separate to the research “*may itself be a source of anxiety*” (Ritchie *et al.*, 2013, p.95).

To ensure informed consent could be attained, access to a participant information sheet (*Appendix 6*) was made available to any interested service users during all bureau opening hours. The information sheet detailed the outline and aims of the research, describing what involvement would be required from them as participants, how long the interview would last and what difference any involvement may make to them.

In addition, employees and volunteers at the bureau were made aware of the research and given the opportunity to ask questions to ensure they were also well-informed should service users enquire about participation. This was also communicated with the district’s specialist debt advisors; a role within the organisation that among other debts issues, involves the provision of advice and advocacy regarding domestic fuel debts.

It was recognised that some service users may not have access to email but may still wish to participate in the research. For this reason it was negotiated with the organisation that, if such circumstances arose, arrangements were made that allowed the researcher to contact the service user by telephone, or meet face-to-face at the bureaux in order to discuss the research in more detail. Once service users had confirmed an interest to participate (via telephone or email), an appropriate time and place to complete the interview was arranged.

### 3.7 Sampling strategy

In qualitative research, Onwuegbzie and Leech (2007) highlight the importance of homogeneity within the sample, whereby all participants possess similar characteristics or attributes and have membership of a subgroup necessary to achieve the research aims. In view of this, the sampling criteria set out to include: young adults, aged 18-25, with recent or present experience of living independently.

Adopting a proxy based approach, as has been widely utilised in fuel poverty research to date, the sampling criteria was further restricted to include only those young adults who also had past or present experience of unemployment and/or claiming a means-tested benefit. While it is recognised that unemployment or receipt of a means-tested benefit is not a definitive indicator of fuel poverty, such households are often categorised as 'at risk' groups (DECC, 2014b). As noted in the literature review, significant considerations of such 'at risk' groups are critical, especially at a time when fuel poverty research and policy is calling for a shift away from the traditional 'binary thinking' where a household either *is* or *isn't* fuel poor (Bouzarovski *et al.*, 2013; DECC, 2014b; Hills, 2012).

With regards to sample size, it is widely accepted that qualitative methodologies utilise smaller samples to arrive at a rich understanding of subjective experience, typically exploring how individuals make sense of such experiences within their narrative accounts (Sullivan, Gibson & Riley, 2013). Therefore, qualitative research that draws from phenomenological and constructivist frameworks does not seek to uncover universal and definitive truths about experience; instead, such approaches aim to explore how meaning and understanding can be enhanced (Frost, 2008). Literature has extensively presented definitions of the 'optimal' sample size used in qualitative inquiries (Onwuegbzie and Leech, 2007; Sandelowski, 1995; Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013). One view is that this is determined once 'data saturation' (Guest *et al.*, 2006; Robinson, 2014) has been achieved; whereby the researcher continues to conduct interviews until they are able to identify clear patterns in the participants' experiences (Bertaux, 1981).

Within IPA research, detailed analysis concentrates on a small number of cases to allow the researcher to fully attend to "*the complexity of human phenomena*" (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p.51). In the methodology text '*IPA: Theory, Method and Practice*', the authors note that the inclusion of three to six participants is "*a reasonable sample size for a student project using IPA*" (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.51). Drawing on this guidance, the narrative accounts of six participants were analysed for this research.

### 3.8 The Interviews

Four of the participants agreed to face-to-face interviews which were conducted at the Salford City bureau; a place of familiarity and where access to a private and suitably quiet room was provided by the organisation. Interviews typically lasted between 45 minutes

and one hour. Ethical considerations were adhered to, with each participant given a further opportunity to read through the information sheet and ask questions about the research and their participation. Written consent was obtained (see Appendix 3) and prior to each interview, participants were reminded that their involvement was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw at any stage without giving a reason and without consequence.

Two participants identified that a telephone interview would be more convenient. Research comparing the analyses of qualitative data collected by way of face-to-face or telephone interviews concluded that there is no significant difference, in terms of data quality, between the two data collection techniques (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). Telephone interviewees for the present research were offered access to the participant information sheet and the consent form via email, or by post where time permitted. For the two telephone interviews, the interviewees provided verbal consent over the phone which was recorded at the start of the interview. As with the face-to-face interviews, each lasted between 45 minutes and one hour.

In order to ensure that accurate reflections and interpretations of the participants' accounts could be included in the analysis, the decision was made to tape record the interviews. This method offers the researcher a greater sense of freedom during the interview and the flexibility to fully engage in interviewer-interviewee interactions. Halcomb and Davidson (2006) note that the use of audio recordings can reduce interviewer bias, allowing the interviewer *"to reflect on the conversation to ensure that the meanings conveyed by participants are adequately represented"* (p.41) in the production of research outputs, including this thesis. Furthermore, the benefits of using

audio recordings, in terms of ongoing researcher development, reflection and student supervision have been noted in the literature (Fasik, 2001). For the present research, additional consent was obtained from each participant to audio record the interview (for the full consent form, see *Appendix 3*).

Audio recordings were also complimented by hand-written reflective notes, which were taken briefly during the interviews and in greater detail after each interview was completed. Utilising both methods of data capture, where verbatim transcripts are combined with field notes, a detailed and well-rounded reflection of each interview could be drawn upon throughout the analytic process.

In accordance with data protection, signed consent forms were stored in a locked filing cabinet at the university. After each interview, audio files were transferred to a password protected computer file, to which only the researcher had access. In addition, participants were made aware of the intended use of extracts within the thesis and that all identifiable information would be omitted in order to maintain their anonymity. As previously noted, in an effort to further maintain participant confidentiality and anonymity, all participants have been allocated a pseudonym which has been used throughout the production of this thesis.

### 3.9 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Fundamentally, qualitative research that is underpinned by a phenomenological framework seeks to generate a greater understanding of human lived experience (Wilson, 2015). A prominent research method which operates within this epistemological

framework is that of IPA (Willig, 2001). Introducing the theoretical foundations of IPA, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) note that:

*“IPA is an approach to qualitative, experiential and psychological research which has been informed by key concepts and debates from three key areas of the philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics and ideography” (p.11).*

From a phenomenological perspective, IPA research expresses a concern with how individuals, for whom certain experiences are shared, construct personal meaning and make sense of their lived experience within particular contexts (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). With a commitment to the *“quality and texture of individual experience”* (Willig, 2001, p.53), it is said to follow an ideographic approach in that analysis focuses on the particular, aiming to *“arrive at a rich description of individual cases”* (Sullivan et al., 2012, p131).

Shinebourne (2011) describes IPA research as adopting a ‘centre-ground position’ between experiential and discursive approaches commonly adopted within qualitative research. On the one hand, it is considered as phenomenological in that it expresses a philosophical concern with how individuals construct and make sense of their lived experience (Smith et al., 2009). On the other hand, *“the discursive approaches are focused on language as a social action that is used to construct and create the social world”* (Shinebourne, 2011, *Ontology of IPA*, paragraph 1).

As with many phenomenological research methods, *“IPA accepts the impossibility of gaining direct access to the research participants’ life worlds”* (Willig, 2001, p.53), therefore participants are attempting to make sense of their experiences through

reflective processes which Smith *et al.* (2009) terms the “*interpretative endeavour*” (p.3). Central to the analytic process is the role of the researcher who is “*trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them*” (Smith *et al.*, 2009, p.3). Referred to as a double hermeneutic, this requires the researcher themselves to engage in the “*interpretative endeavour*” (Smith *et al.*, 2009, p.3), whereby attempts are made to understand such experiences from the perspective of the participant (Shinebourne, 2011). Consequently, as Willig (2001) highlights, this necessarily implicates the role of the researcher, their own world views, assumptions and biases, as well the nature of the interviewer-interviewee interaction. Sullivan, Gibson and Riley (2010) posit that the “*best way to deal with subjectivity is to give it an overt role in the research process*” (p.159). In particular, this forms a critical part of IPA research, where the researcher carefully engages in ongoing reflexive practices. For the present research, such practices will be discussed in greater detail in the final chapter (see *Chapter Six*), within which a section is dedicated to reflexivity.

### 3.10 Analytic Procedure

Interview transcripts were analysed according to the principles of IPA, drawing on the guidance outlined by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). However as they highlight “*the existing literature on analysis in IPA has not prescribed a ‘single’ method for working with data*” (p.79). Adaptations to suggested guidelines are generally encouraged; most notably where such modifications work to better satisfy the research aims (Shinebourne, 2011). Therefore, the steps outlined in this section were adopted with a view to maintaining this sense of flexibility, as advocated by the existing literature. The rest of this section will outline the steps taken throughout the analytic procedure.



It is important to note at this stage that interview transcripts were approached individually at first, then as the emergent themes developed from each of the participants' accounts, initial themes were brought together as a whole to identify masters themes of descriptive, theoretical and conceptual similarity (Willig, 2001).

### 3.10.1 Transcription

Each interview was recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed verbatim by the researcher as soon as was practicably possible. As noted earlier, this provided the opportunity for ongoing researcher-supervisor review and guidance regarding the interview guide and interview strategies (Smith *et al.*, 2009). After the interviews had been completed, supplementary field notes, taken to enhance the depth and roundedness of the data, were organised and brought together with the interview transcripts.

### 3.10.2 Initial readings

The participants' accounts were read several times to allow for familiarity with the content; an aspect which was initiated during transcription itself. Initial readings of the transcripts allowed the researcher to establish "*a holistic sense of the breadth and depth of the experiences the participant has talked about*" (Sullivan *et al.*, 2012, p.145). At this stage, listening to audio recordings and reading transcripts simultaneously proved to be extremely useful in aiding the researcher to become fully immersed in the data. The literature notes that initial engagement with the transcripts can be overwhelming where limitless possibilities regarding emergent ideas and interpretations are realised (Smith *et al.*, 2009; Shinebourne, 2011). Use of a research diary, in which such thoughts and ideas

could be recorded throughout data collection and the analytic procedure, served to alleviate some of these concerns. This use of a research diary will be further noted on within the final chapter of this thesis (see Chapter Six: Conclusions), which, as noted, includes a section focused on reflexivity.

### 3.10.3 Initial noting and the development of emergent themes

Subsequent readings of the transcripts concentrated on engaging in a close line-by-line analysis of the text. As outlined by Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2006), it is at this stage that the researcher attends closely to experiential claims, noting at the same time on the participants' perceptions, concerns and understandings (Smith *et al.*, 2009). Transcripts were annotated with particular focus given to "*content, use of language, context and interpretative comments*" (Shinebourne, 2011). An example of this stage in the analytic procedure has been included (see *Figure 3.1* on the following page).

Figure 3.1 Example of initial analytical comments

Original Transcript	Exploratory comments
<p>Interviewer: what was the impact, day to day, of having damp at the property?</p> <p>Rehana: <u>well I'm asthmatic</u> you see, so having damp in the room where you are, it cause your asthma to set off...<u>you get more colds and coughs</u> and what not, so it's the chest infections really, that the damp causes.</p> <p>I: Did you notice it, did that affect your children as well as you?</p> <p>R: Not my daughter really. My daughter was only three months old when <u>we actually moved out of that flat</u>, so we lived there for 9 months, I had my daughter in September and then we moved out three months later into [new property], because the was that bad in my bedroom. It was behind the wardrobe in my bedroom, <u>my clothes were getting mouldy</u> because <u>the damp was penetrating</u> through the wardrobe, from the back of the wardrobe. It was that bad. We told the council, they did nothing. So, we moved out.</p> <p>I: how did that make you feel?</p> <p>R: Like we was <u>being ignored</u>, really. When you've got a problem and you need it sorting and <u>they just ignore you</u>, yeh.</p> <p>I: do you think that is characteristic of young adults living in properties, or do you think it is across all age ranges, dealing with this sort of problem?</p> <p>R: I think that's all ages, really, <u>because of the council</u>, once you are in the council and you are paying rent that's it, the council just don't do anything really <u>but...you know?</u></p>	<p><i>Positioning vulnerability – "I'm asthmatic"</i>  <i>Moving from 'I' to 'you' – asserting collective understanding.</i>  <i>Introduction of health impacts of living with damp – particularly the relationship with respiratory conditions. Asserting damp/cold conditions as the <u>cause</u>?</i></p> <p><i>Daughter not impacted – see earlier re. Narrating her identity and responsibility as a parent.</i></p> <p><i>No strategy to overcome it; other than to move.</i>  <i>Implications linked to laundry and clothes. Self-awareness?</i>  <i>"Penetrating" – invasiveness of the condition, signifying strength – positioning her inability to resolve – too powerful?</i>  <i>Lack of support.</i>  <i>Role of others, esp. housing provider in this case – problem remains so tenants must go to overcome problem.</i></p> <p><i>Poor communication with housing providers.</i>  <i>There is an 'intentional' disregard – suggests issue may not be the presence of the damp, but the lack of action or support from landlords?</i></p> <p><i>Not exclusive to young adulthood – suggesting that this is an issue reflecting more accurately tenant-landlord relationships – which are poor. The issue not perceived as coming to an end once no longer a young adult.</i>  <i>"but...you know?" – given up?</i>  <i>Powerlessness, no capacity to act?</i></p>

The next stage of the analysis involved moving the analytic focus towards the broad set of notes. For each transcript, initial notes were brought together to begin to identify emerging themes. It is at this stage, as Smith *et al.* (2009) note, that “*the original whole of the interview becomes a set of parts*” (p.91) following a process of re-organisation and fragmentation. Themes with conceptual similarity were clustered, and assigned descriptive labels (see *Table 3.2*).

*Table 3.2 Example of clustered themes*

Structural Threats
<i>Pervasiveness of damp and mould</i>
<i>Impacts of poor housing/energy inefficiency</i>
<i>Psychological</i>
<i>Health</i>
<i>Monetary</i>
<i>Unsuitable property size for household needs</i>
Behavioural Threats
<i>Householder behaviours</i>
<i>Individual vs. whole household</i>
<i>Compromise</i>
Role of others
<i>Role of those responsible for mitigating threats</i>
<i>Trusted network of support</i>
<i>Irresponsible practice (of inds? Others?)</i>

#### 3.10.4 Integration of cases

As noted, the analysis was initially completed on a case-by-case basis, with each interview transcript analysed individually at first. Adhering to the ideographic approach adopted in IPA research, attempts were made to ‘bracket’ emergent ideas and themes from previous transcripts, therefore allowing new themes to emerge from each of the participant’s accounts in turn. While it was recognised that a certain level of influence from previous cases would be inevitable (Smith *et al.*, 2009), the researcher made attempts to overcome this by allowing sufficient time, where possible, between the analysis of each transcript.

The next stage of the analysis set out to integrate the emergent themes developed from each of the individual cases. Using separate Microsoft Word documents, each emergent theme was supplemented by extracts taken from the transcripts. The researcher then engaged with hard copies created for each of the emergent themes, from all six of the transcripts, working to identify patterns across the data set as a whole. From this, themes of theoretical or conceptual similarity were clustered, and in some cases relabelled and redefined.

The process of qualitative analysis is understood to be iterative and at each stage themes were reviewed a number of times. Themes were checked against the transcripts continually to ensure they remained grounded within the participants' narrative accounts. The final overarching themes were established and excerpts from the transcripts were selected to capture the essence of the emergent themes, patterns and interpretations from the data.

### 3.10.5 Introducing the master themes

Three master themes emerged from the analysis: '*making home*', '*threats to home comfort*' and '*energy and coping*'. The table on the following page (see *Table 3.3*) presents each of the three master themes, also introducing a number corresponding sub-themes.

Table 3.3 Master themes

Theme One: 'Making Home': Establishing the independent home	
Characteristics	1. The personalised home
	2. The safe and secure home
	3. The clean home
Theme Two: Energy Vulnerability and Threats to Home Comfort	
Threats	1. Damp and mould
	2. Laundry practices
	3. The 'unexpected' bill
	4. Disconnection
Theme Three: Energy and Coping	
Mechanisms	1. Behavioural mechanisms
	2. Psychological mechanisms

### 3.11 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the methods used. In terms of research design, the methodological approaches to data collection and the analytic procedure have been presented. Following the analysis, three major themes emerged from the participants' accounts and these have been introduced in the table above (see *Table 3.4*).

The following chapters, Chapter Four and Chapter Five, will present the findings from the analysis, as guided by the set of research questions outlined in the final section of the literature review (see *Section 2.7*). To remind the reader, the research questions are presented again on the following page (see *Table 3.4*).

*Table 3.4: The Research Questions*

- How do young adults describe their experiences of living independently and in what contexts do these experiences occur (for example, tenure type and household formation)?
- How do young adults construct and make sense of their experiences of managing the home independently, and within these experiences how do they reflect on their relationship with energy?
- What is the nature of young adults' perceptions, attitudes and experiences of energy vulnerability?
- What are the specific support needs of young adult households, in terms of fuel poverty and energy vulnerability, and how can support be better tailored to their needs?

The findings are presented across two separate chapters due to the distinction between the masters themes presented. In Chapter Four, the first research question will be addressed; this relates to the research findings focused on the experiences of living independently and the context of the independent home. The following chapter, Chapter Five, will discuss the findings in relation to the second, third, and fourth research question which aimed to explore, more specifically, the lived experience of energy, including energy related challenges and vulnerabilities.

## Chapter Four: Housing pathways and ‘making home’

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter is the first of two chapters to present the main findings from the analysis. Before the first master theme is presented (in *Section 4.3*), a more in-depth introduction to the sample will be provided in *Section 4.2*.

As highlighted by previous research, the housing pathways of young adults are largely characterised by transience and precariousness; consequently, it has been suggested that as a result this demographic group may represent a “*part of society that is invisible to fuel poverty assistance*” (Bouzarovski *et al.*, 2013, p.9). Documenting similarly transient and precarious experiences, the dynamic housing pathways of the present sample will be discussed in *Section 4.3*. This is intended to provide the reader with detailed insights into the historical, social and cultural backgrounds of the participants, as well as clarifying some of the common terms to be used throughout the remaining chapters. In addition, this section will go some way to situate the findings in relation to the first research question, which aimed to explore the participants’ experiences of the ‘independent home’ and the contexts in which these experiences occur (for example, living with a partner, migrating, moving to university accommodation, periods spent living in homeless shelters, etc.).

While formalised terms such as ‘fuel poverty’ or ‘energy vulnerability’ were not used throughout the interviews, there were many occasions where participants alluded to household conditions associated with such challenges. References included: a lack of



thermal comfort in the home, self-disconnection of energy supply, energy debts, ill-health, as well as unrelenting challenges with damp and mouldy properties.

Given this finding, and findings from previous research (where central to the issue of fuel poverty among young adults may be a lack of 'recognition' or 'acknowledgement'), the analytic focus for this research was intentionally broadened to also consider the experiences of living independently and the context of the independent home. This forms a critical place in which young adults establish their relationship with domestic energy, and subsequently their experiences of energy-related challenges or vulnerabilities. Although limited, some aspects of energy-related experiences did emerge within this part of the analysis; as such, these features will be presented within this chapter. (However, as noted earlier, a more detailed discussion of the findings in relation to 'energy in the home', as well as energy-related challenges and vulnerabilities, will be presented in the following chapter, Chapter Five.)

Within this chapter, the first of three master themes will be presented. This will present the findings in relation to the concept of 'making home', that is establishing the independent home, as presented by Hopkins (2010). In the participants' narratives of 'making home', three distinctive characteristics were identified. These included: the ability to personalise the living space, the capacity to provide and sustain a safe and secure environment, and the role and responsibility regarding cleanliness and domesticity in the home.

## 4.2 Introducing the Participants

The information shown in the table below (*see Table 4.1*) reflects the participants' circumstances at the time of being interviewed. The table also outlines the method used by each of the participants for paying gas and electricity costs in their current or most recent independent home. To reiterate, each participant has been allocated a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. In addition to the table below, a short biographical profile for each of the six participants has been included in the appendices (*Appendix 7*).

*Table 4.1 The participants*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Household composition</b>	<b>Tenure type</b>	<b>Household employment status</b>	<b>Gas</b>	<b>Electricity</b>
<b>Tracy</b>	23	Couple	PRS <sup>1</sup>	Self-employed	PPM <sup>3</sup>	PPM
<b>Janet</b>	23	One adult; two children	SH <sup>2</sup>	Self-employed	CM <sup>4</sup>	CM
<b>Adam</b>	21	Single adult	SH	Unemployed	N/A	PPM
<b>Jo</b>	24	Couple	Parents (previously in PRS)	Employed	CM	CM
<b>Maggie</b>	21	Couple	SH	Unemployed	PPM	PPM
<b>Rehana</b>	23	Couple; two children	Parents (previously in PRS)	Employed	PPM	PPM

<sup>1</sup>Private rented sector    <sup>3</sup>Prepayment meter

<sup>2</sup>Social housing    <sup>4</sup>Credit meter

The sample consisted of five female participants and one male. Participants lived across tenure types with some living in social housing properties and others renting within the private rented sector. Two participants were currently living with their partner's parents as a temporary measure but had lived independently until recently. The amount of time the participants had spent independently managing their own homes varied from three months to more than five years. Each participant's household structure varied, though it

was most common for them to be living as a member of a couple with no children (n=3). Of the remaining three participants: two were parents, one living as a lone parent, and the sixth young adult lived alone. Two of the six participants were graduates, having both lived in a house in multiple occupation during their time as students.

Household income varied widely. Three of the participants were in employment at the time of being interviewed, however all three had experienced periods of unemployment in the past and had consequently been in payment of a means-tested benefit. Two young adults were currently unemployed and in receipt of jobseekers allowance. As a result of difficulties with the claiming process, once participant had attempted to claim jobseekers allowance while unemployed but a payment had never been made, resulting in them having to draw on limited savings and financial support from their family. To note, all of the participants had experiences of claiming, or attempting to claim, a means-tested benefit during periods spent independently managing their own homes.

The range of means-tested benefits that the participants had claimed, or attempted to claim, included *jobseekers allowance*, *income support*, *housing benefit*, *council tax reduction* and *tax credits*. None of the participants had past or current experience of claiming benefits as a result of ill-health or disabilities.

### 4.3 The Housing Pathways of the Sample

The participants' accounts revealed a broad array of life experiences, particularly with regard to their housing pathways to date. No two participants had followed the same trajectory, however during the early stages of analysis, three distinct phases in their housing pathways emerged.

The first of the three phases was characterised by experiences of living in a parent or caregiver's home, where the participants assumed the role of a dependent household member, moving from childhood to adolescence and more recently into early adulthood. The second phase was regarded as a variety of residential experiences perceived as temporary or transitional, such as university accommodation or time spent supported by local authority homelessness provision (i.e. hostels). Notably, the data revealed that perhaps a less commonly identified 'temporary home' is that of the 'parental home' where participants described experiences of returning to their parent's home as a stepping stone or temporary transition (where the participant had left and then returned at a later stage). Thirdly, and of primary concern to this research, were the young adults' experiences of independently managing a household as a single person, or as part of a couple. For clarity throughout the remaining text, when presenting the participants' interpretations of 'home' at each phase, the following terms will be used: the '*parental home*', the '*temporary home*' and the '*independent home*' (or homes).

As well as distinguishing between multiple interpretations of 'home', the participants identified variations in housing status which were constructed in terms of household membership. The interviewees portrayed household membership in three ways: as a dependent, non-dependent or independent household member.

Across all of the interviews the participants distinguished between the three phases, or interpretations of home, when communicating their experiences; however, housing pathways were not necessarily presented in a linear narrative. Once leaving the home of a parent or caregiver – at the same time 'graduating' from the status of a dependent household member - the interviewees revealed that often their experiences were

recursive. In particular, Jo was a key example of this, where at eighteen years-old she moved from her parent's home into university accommodation, returning temporarily to the parental home afterwards. Several months later, she made a transition into privately rented accommodation with her partner, however, at the time of being interviewed, she had returned to her parent's home once more, stressing that her most recent move was "*only temporary*". Although this represented a more convoluted example, such back-and-forth experiences were not uncommon across the participants' accounts. This supports the notion proposed by Hopkins (2010) whereby moving out of the parental home is more accurately characterised as a "*complex process rather than a one-off event*" (p.107).

Storied accounts showed considerable diversity across the participant's lived experience of the 'parental home'. Set across a wide-ranging geographical context, the locales of the 'parental home' were situated across various parts of the UK (including the North-West and the South of England), one European country (Poland), and also more broadly across an international setting (Iran, Sudan and Israel). In terms of tenure, the homes of the participants' parents and caregivers varied; participants had grown up in rented properties across the social housing and private rented sector, as well as in privately owned properties.

The age at which participants left the 'parental home' ranged from eighteen to twenty-one years-old. Circumstances which had resulted in this transition included: starting university (Tracy and Jo), becoming a parent (Janet and Rehana), seeking asylum in the UK (Maggie) and overcrowding in the 'parental home' (Adam). The lived experience of leaving the 'parental home' was most commonly narrated in terms of a quest for greater

independence, however within each interview the above factors were identified as key triggers for making the transition.

Four of the participants had current or previous experience of living in privately rented accommodation; some arriving at this point through contact with local authority homelessness assistance, whereas for others it was considered the most viable option for sustaining independence after finishing university. Privately rented properties were typically accessed through contact with estate agents however experiences of renting a property directly from the landlord also emerged, revealing contrasting experiences across the participants' narratives. The participants' relationships with others, such as landlords and housing providers will be discussed in greater detail throughout the findings chapters.

Three of participants were currently living in social housing, with two interviewees noting that they had moved between homes as a result of increasing family size and poor property condition. In fact, all of the participants had moved between properties a number of times as independent adults. Interestingly, despite living independently in multiple properties since leaving the parental home, only one of the participants had transitioned between tenure types, with Rehana moving from social housing into a privately rented property as a result of unresolved and untreated damp and mould.

None of the participants had past or current experience of being an owner-occupier, therefore such experiences were entirely narrated from their perspectives as tenants. This extensively implicated the role of others such as social housing providers, private landlords and estate agents, introducing the concepts (and challenges) of power and

agency in the home. Relationships with others, such as the actors introduced here, was a dominant theme within the participants' lived experience; one which will be noted on throughout the analysis.

This section has introduced the dynamic housing pathways across the sample as a whole, illustrating a number of commonalities and divergences across the lived experience of those interviewed. Early analysis revealed a broad acknowledgment and understanding of changing housing status across the housing pathway of young adults. Participants made sense of such transitions and phases through interpretative endeavours focused on multiple and distinctive meanings of 'home'.

The following section will present the first master theme which emerged from the analysis - *'establishing the independent home'* – which focused in greater detail on the participants' experiences of establishing the 'independent home'.

#### 4.4 *'Making Home'*: Establishing the independent *home*

##### 4.4.1 Introducing Theme One

The home represents a critical context in which an individual's sense of their identity forms (Hopkins, 2010; Arnett, 2000). This context is of unquestionable importance when exploring the nature of identity formation with regards to household status; which for the aims of this research was concerned more specifically with that of an 'independent household member'. As Hopkins (2010) notes: *"a very important aspect of young people's lives is often the experience of 'making home' and the practices and processes associated with this"* (p.111). In this regard, the first master theme (see *Table 4.2*) explores a number

of 'practices' and 'processes' characterised by the participants as fundamental in establishing a sense of the independent home.

*Table 4.2 Theme One*

Theme One: 'Making Home': Establishing the independent home	
Characteristics	1. The personalised home
	2. The safe and secure home
	3. The clean home

To generate a greater understanding of how those aged under twenty-five construct and present their interpretations of the 'independent home', one of the prompts included in the interview guide (see *Appendix 4*) invited participants to discuss: "What makes a house a home?" Maintaining the fluidity and flexibility of the qualitative interview, not all participants were asked this question directly; however, even in the absence of a direct prompt, interviewees frequently asserted their understanding of three major characteristics associated with the practices and processes involved in managing the home independently.

Interpretations of *independence* and *adulthood* were mostly constructed in terms of expectations and responsibilities, where the role of managing the home independently was one characterised by the capacity to provide and sustain adequate resources. Understanding this position of the independent householder as the provider and the person who sustains comfort is important for considering the relationship this may have with regards to energy and energy-related comfort in the home. Though the participants did highlight the importance of energy related concepts, such as warmth and adequate



provision of energy services, such characteristics were not positioned as of critical importance in those initial stages of establishing the 'independent home'. This section will focus on the three sub-themes, or 'characteristics', that were presented by the interviewees.

#### 4.4.2 "We made it our own": The personalised home

During periods of significant transition, such as in young adulthood, those unable to establish a clear sense of their identity "*may experience social, personal and psychological stress*" (Shim *et al.*, 2013, p.129). Several participants suggested that the capacity to make changes to the living space – more specifically to personalise it – was of critical importance to establishing a sense of home and consequently in the formation of their identity as an 'independent household member', as Rehana outlines:

*You can do what you like, you can make it your own style whereas if you live with parents, it's their style. If you know what I mean? So if you're on your own, when you are on your own, you can do it as you please. Make it your own home. (Rehana)*

Decorating the home was frequently cited as a means to achieving this, with activities ranging from painting the walls to replacing fixtures such as the kitchen or storage areas, as well as the renovation of garden space and purchasing furniture and other household items. Often, the inability to decorate or personalise the 'independent home' was attributed to restricted financial resources, not a lack of practical skill, knowledge or motivation. Interestingly, none of the participants suggested that the inability to decorate was a result of them being tenants and therefore potentially restricted by tenancy agreements and actions deemed permissible by their landlords. A failure to mention this

does not necessarily suggest that such restrictions weren't in place, but could indicate that the participants felt a greater sense of restriction by their limited financial resources. One interviewee revealed that access to funding from their housing provider had helped to overcome this barrier. For Adam, like other interviewees, the capacity to decorate the home was narrated as a positive and valuable experience; one reflected upon with a sense of pride and agency. For many, this exemplified a critical opportunity to assert independence in their own home:

*The first time I did apply in the housing office after six months they send a letter for me from [housing association], for this house. It is fine. They gave me some paint, well £80 I think, for the living room, the toilet, you know. They gave me, but I painted by myself. Yeh, decorating myself. My bedroom is light blue and the toilet is white.*

*The kitchen is like, light green, no you know, like a lemon colour. Light. (Adam)*

Much smaller in scale and predominantly visual forms of adaptations, such as hanging pictures and displaying photographs, were also noted as key examples of ways in which the participants personalised the living space. As noted by Perkins and Thorns (2012, p.78): “objects and artwork displayed in homes are often sources of attachment, status and identity”. This accurately reflected the interpretations of a number of the interviewees, where the ability to make changes to the living space was a defining feature of what made the property their home. As Rehana identifies in the excerpt below.

*Because we fitted a new kitchen, we made it our own. We decorated how we liked.*

*It was lovely at the end of it and we had just started decorating more, we had started*

*doing all the glossing and then we had to move out. The garden was fine for us, and it was, it was just home, really. My little big bubble. (Rehana)*

Personalisation is portrayed with a sense of pride and achievement. The task is depicted as a substantial challenge; requiring monetary, physical and emotional investment, as well as the freedom or capacity to make the desired, and to some degree necessary, changes to a space which is only rented and not owned. Rehana demonstrates a positive example in that she had considerable freedom to personalise her most recent home. However, this excerpt highlights a troubling aspect of housing and the ability of young adults to provide and sustain a comfortable home environment: Rehana signifies the instability and impermanence with regards to her housing pathway to date.

This was similarly noted across the sample where, as outlined earlier, many of the interviewees had lived in multiple homes as independent household members. Rehana perceives her position as one with very limited power whereby the family are made to leave despite substantial efforts invested into the home. In her dialogue this assumes a particularly interesting form; Rehana describes her previous home as “my *little big bubble*”. Metaphorically presented as a *bubble*, the home provides a cosy, amniotic environment for herself and her family; however, Rehana demonstrates that as with the unpredictability of a bubble, which could pop at any time, her attachment to the space is similarly capricious. Such experiences were only presented by participants living in privately rented accommodation, highlighting some disparities across the lived experience of young adults living in different tenures.

Interestingly, likening early experiences of living independently as *'living in a bubble'* was also noted in the research conducted by Bouzarovski *et al.*'s (2013), where one participant, Becky, stated: *"we don't have that much experience and well, I know we are living on our own, but we are still in a bit of a bubble, it is not the same"* (p.6). Similarly, this perspective also presents a sense of unpredictability and instability, however Becky's position symbolises a sense of detachment. In this way, Rehana and Becky's perspectives appear to demonstrate that young adults perceive their experiences of the independent home as different in some way to the lived experience of other householders, for example older adult households. This further illustrates a perception among young adults, in the present sample and within other research, that early housing pathways are characterised as transitional and precarious.

When living in an 'independent home', the participants generally expressed a sense of freedom over their capacity to personalise the living space. A contrasting experience was observed in 'temporary homes' where participants demonstrated a heightened awareness of living in 'shared spaces' in which the *"capacity to exercise individuality and autonomy"* (Perkins & Thorns, 2012, p.77), in terms of personalising the living space, had to be reconciled with that of the other residents. As Tracy noted:

*...in a student house you can't put your pictures up on the wall because it's your picture and it's not your housemate's picture. (Tracy)*

Again, a comparison can be drawn from previous research conducted by Bouzarovski *et al.* (2013), in that processes of reconciliation and renegotiation regarding the needs and desires of household members living in shared spaces similarly emerged from the data. In

the previous research, the findings highlighted more specifically the variability in energy needs and affordability between multiple independent household members. Tensions would be avoided, whereby the young adults interviewed in their research “*would allow themselves to get cold because they don’t want to cause an argument with those on tighter budgets who can’t afford any more heating*” (Bouzarovski *et al.*, 2013, p.5). Tracy, in the excerpt above, demonstrates that such awareness consumes many aspects of the young adults lived experience, when living in a shared home. As noted in the literature review, the newly implemented fuel poverty strategy, entitled “*Cutting the Cost of Keeping Warm: A Fuel Poverty Strategy for England*” (DECC, 2015b), has outlined a critical need to better understand fuel poverty as experienced by certain household formations such as houses in multiple occupation.

#### 4.4.3 The Safe and Secure Home

A recurrent theme in the interviews was a sense among participants that the home should be symbolic of a protective space. Therefore, creating a secure and safe environment was a key responsibility in establishing the ‘independent home’. In this regard, with instability and insecurity comes increased vulnerability, from a number of perspectives, including the challenges to energy vulnerability (as outlined in the study by Middlemiss & Gillard, 2015) which will be discussed further in the following chapter.

Narratives commonly combined notions of security and comfort, suggesting that, from the interviewees’ perspective, one was dependent upon the other. This was evidenced in the language used by the interviewees who depicted the home as a ‘cosy’, or as referenced earlier by Rehana, as “*my little big bubble*”. Alternative identities were often

used as a vehicle for expressing the importance of safety and security at home. Rehana and Janet in particular, both parents of young children, positioned this characteristic of home as critical. Such interpretations, to some extent, may be linked to gender differences, where previous research has highlighted that the interpretations of home among female household members are often depicted as a place of “*refuge or site of protection*” (Hopkins, 2010, p.98).

Further documenting interpretative contrasts between temporary and permanent homes, those interviewed highlighted examples where temporary homes failed to offer an adequate level of safety and security. Participants not only described safety and security in terms of threats to personal safety; an ongoing concern was also disclosed regarding the potential for loss or damage of personal possessions. Such concerns were used as a justification for employing strategies to mitigate any potential for loss or damage, perceived or otherwise. One approach was to store objects of attachment in a place that could be considered “*protected and safe*” (Jo). For Jo, this drew upon interpretations of ‘multiple homes’ and resulted in leaving possessions in the ‘parental home’ while at university.

*For me it is a lot about my possessions as well. I like to feel like all of my things are protected and safe in the home and when I was in that place I didn't feel like that at all. I didn't want to have any of my stuff there. I left a lot of it with my parents unless I needed it because I didn't feel like, it didn't feel like a home. It felt temporary. I didn't want my things there whereas in the flat I liked my things there and on display, that sort of thing. (Jo)*

In this excerpt, Jo further highlights how the perception of stability and permanence can be linked to various interpretations of 'home'. The 'parental home', here, is perceived as stable and reliable. From Jo's perspective, her parents, in establishing the 'independent home', have achieved the fundamental requirement of safety and security at home; an endeavour the young adults interviewed are attempting to complete themselves. In this sense the 'parental home' can be relied upon until the transition to adulthood, or the formation of the 'adult' identity (Arnett, 2000), has been completed. In addition, this highlights an interpretative relationship between security and impermanence. The 'temporary home', and for some participants also the 'independent home', is not characteristic of permanence or stability, most frequently represented within the interviews as a place of insecurity.

The findings illustrate that participants perceive multiple threats in their experiences as independent household members, of which many may not be characterised as energy- or fuel poverty-related. In this regard, an important consideration for research that aims to explore the experiences of fuel poverty among this demographic group might look to better understanding how such households respond or cope to different threats and to what extent, if any, threats are prioritised. Essentially, are young adult households failing to identify that they live in or at risk of fuel poverty, or is the presence of other, potentially higher-ranking threats enough to result in energy-related issues becoming a lesser concern? This has been similarly noted on in an earlier point raised in the introduction: the researcher highlighted that experiences as an employee at Salford Citizens Advice revealed that young adult service users often appeared to rank or prioritise personal

debts, with energy debts frequently assuming a much lesser concern in comparison, if presented as an issue at all.

#### 4.4.4 The Clean Home

The third characteristic to emerge from the participants accounts centred on domesticity. Tasks mostly frequently discussed included cleaning, cooking and laundry, with the participants and any other independent household members portrayed as solely responsible. Terms such as “shipshape” and “spick and span” were used to highlight the importance of sustaining adequate levels of cleanliness in the ‘independent home’. Successfully and efficiently attending to domestic duties was, to some extent, portrayed as indicative of the young adult’s ability to independently manage the home, and was affected by experiences of thermal comfort.

The importance of cleanliness was highlighted in narratives of past experiences, where a number of those interviewed criticised the standard of condition in which previous properties had been left in. This was most frequently commented on with regards to a move into a new property within the private sector. As Jo stated:

*...the things I didn't like about the previous house: it wasn't very clean, it was quite...I mean it was dirty when we moved in. (Jo)*

For Janet, Maggie and Rehana, the interviewees for whom cleanliness was regarded with the greatest significance, aspects of the ‘clean home’ were most commonly situated within narratives of alternative identities, for example, when presenting perceived responsibilities assigned to them as a mother or wife.



*Erm, more cleaning, separating his socks...I put socks together in the washing machine and then when I get them out to dry them...stuck together! I hate it! Erm, looking after the kids, bathing, making tea, cleaning, erm, dropping the kids off at nursery...just a Mum really. Sounds quite lame, really, but just a Mum really. I haven't got any independence, really. Until my son goes to playgroup and then I can finally do something for myself. (Rehana)*

In the excerpt above, despite presenting this aspect of establishing the home as of critical importance, Rehana devalued her role in this respect, referring to her identity as a mother as “lame”. For her, adopting this role within the home had imposed upon her own sense of independence. The domestic duties, here, are not positioned as a responsibility maintained for the comfort of oneself, but rather motivated by a self-awareness of what is socially and culturally expected of her as an ‘independent household member’.

To some extent, domestic duties were portrayed as household behaviours to be learned by young adults when entering their first experiences of living independently. Interviewees disclosed how the transition from the ‘parental home’ to the ‘independent home’ had illustrated the scale of the domestic burden when living independently. For example, Tracy highlighted that: *“when I first moved out at uni, I didn't know how to cook, I hadn't really washed...I didn't realise how much my parents did for me”*. In addition, narrating domesticity as something to be learnt in the early stages of a young adult's housing career, highlights that in relation to certain tasks or responsibilities required of the independent home, there is a lack of awareness or required skills. Constructing their position as a ‘novice’ independent household member may also illustrate key aspects of

the lived experience of energy, for example, to what extent are their experiences shaped by perceptions of being a 'novice' independent householder?

Interestingly, participants presented a critical link between domesticity and energy vulnerability, in that the inability to achieve an adequate level of warmth in the home had a negative impact on the householder's ability to carry out such domestic duties to the standard required. Janet observed a positive shift in her attitude and motivation towards domestic duties after moving into a new, warmer property, evidencing a relationship between thermal comfort and psychological wellbeing. As she outlines in the excerpt below:

*Janet: I mean, I've been happier and I've been like...I wasn't as lazy as I was in the other house, like in the other house. In the new house I have more energy to clean and everything. And in the old one I didn't.*

*Interviewer: That's interesting, that relationship between not feeling comfortable and not being able to get things done...*

*Janet: Yeh, it's easier for me to like, to go and clean the house. It takes me like an hour to do the whole house and when I was in the old house I just couldn't. It was hard to go from one room to another because it was...it was cold.*

This excerpt highlights a critical connection between feeling 'cold' and the ability to "get things done". Janet offers experiences of energy vulnerability in terms of 'sensitivity' to conditions suggestive of fuel poverty; in this case living in a cold home. Despite not explicitly referred to, the energy efficiency of the home, or a lack thereof, is suggested to have a direct relationship with the efficiency of the 'independent household member',

whereby, for Janet, improved property conditions (i.e. a warmer home) resulted in more desirable and efficient domestic behaviours: *“I have more energy”* and *“it takes me like an hour to do the whole house”*.

Interestingly, the transition from an ‘old’ property to a ‘new’ home introduces a key interpretation presented by many of the participants. In this excerpt, *“the old house”* represents a challenge which could not be overcome. Expressing experiences of energy vulnerability, Janet perceived very little ‘adaptive capacity’ (Middlemiss & Gillard, 2015) to respond to the cold conditions of her ‘old’ home. A dominant theme throughout the participants’ discourse presented a collective understanding of ‘old’ being synonymous with poor household conditions, such as the inability to maintain adequate warmth, where the property was perceived as inefficient and inflexible to change.

An important perspective highlighted in dialogue concerning the domestic self, drew on a wider understanding among the participants that failure to establish the ‘independent home’, in this case concerning domesticity, was a product of ‘laziness’, not a lack of support, knowledge or resources. Both Maggie and Janet refer to themselves in this way in the previous two excerpts. The use of negative descriptors such as this, position the participants themselves as solely responsible for failure in this regard. Interestingly, Janet recognises that she was unable to fulfil her domestic duties because *“it was cold”*, however precedes this justification by referring to herself with the use of this pejorative term. Her language suggests sympathy is not wanted and, in this way, broader perceptions of individual and household vulnerability appear to be rejected. Instead, the participants assert a sense of personal responsibility. Situating failures in the narratives of past experience, allowed the participants to narrate their transitions from ‘old’ to

'new', and 'lazy' to 'not lazy', as success stories. This worked to separate their lived experience from one characterised by vulnerability, where, as with failure, success was portrayed as a direct consequence of the individual action (or inaction).

#### 4.4.5 Summary of Theme One

This section has outlined a number of key characteristics presented by the participants when constructing their understanding of 'making home' (Hopkins, 2010). Such aspects were perceived as fundamental in the young adults' identity formation as 'independent household members'. As illustrated, 'making home' predominantly centred on three key factors represented by the participants ability to personalise the living space, to ensure safety and security for both independent and dependent residents as well as visitors, and thirdly, to efficaciously carry out domestic duties. Considered collectively, the examples offered by participants suggested that such aspects were driven by an overall objective to achieve adequate level of comfort in the home. For a number of participants, this was the defining feature of a property in achieving the status of 'home', as Jo simply stated: "*I feel comfortable there*".

### 4.5 Conclusion

Chapter Four has presented detailed introductions to the participants, while illustrating the dynamic, transient, and at times, precarious housing pathways to date. Narratives have highlighted how such experiences are often characterised by a sense of impermanence and for many of the participants, also a sense of instability. Similarities and differences across the lived experience of the participants have been outlined,

drawing attention to the relationship such experiences are suggested to have with perceptions of household status and interpretations of 'home'.

This chapter has also presented the first master theme, '*making home*', addressing the initial research questions which set out to generate a greater understanding of young adults' experience of living independently. Three distinctive characteristics were identified as key to establishing a sense of the independent home, which included: the personalised home, the safe and secure home, and the clean home. When brought together, the three characteristics suggested that that the overall goal of 'making home' was closely linked to their understandings and experiences of comfort.

Although limited, where the participants related such characteristics to an awareness or understanding of the role and experiences of domestic energy in the home, this was illustrated within this chapter. The next chapter, Chapter Five, will focus more specifically on the role of domestic energy in the participants' lived experience as independent household members. The attitudes, perceptions and understandings of their relationship with energy, as well as any identified energy related challenges and vulnerabilities, will be explored.

## Chapter Five: Energy, Threats to Comfort and Coping

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter is the second of two chapters to present the main findings from the analysis. It has been noted previously that formalised terms such as ‘fuel poverty’ or ‘energy vulnerability’ were not used during any of the interviews. However, despite not using these terms explicitly to narrate their own experiences, or the experiences of others, many references were made to household conditions which could indicate the participants were living in fuel poverty. Such references included: a lack of thermal comfort in the home, self-disconnection of energy supply, energy debts, ill-health, and unrelenting challenges with damp and mouldy properties. It is within this chapter that references to such energy- or fuel poverty-related issues will be outlined and discussed in greater detail.

As previously noted, this research aimed to identify and analyse how young adults’ construct and make sense of their understanding of domestic energy (i.e. gas and electricity) in the independent home, as well as considering the ways in which young adult households may perceive themselves to be burdened or threatened by energy-related challenges or vulnerabilities. The analysis revealed that narratives concerning domestic energy in the independent home were mostly conveyed in two ways. Firstly, energy-related aspects of lived experience were constructed by the participants in terms of threats, specifically threats to comfort in the independent home. The second highlighted a range of behavioral and psychological mechanisms of coping employed by the young adults within this context. Forming the second and third master themes, a number of

'threats to comfort' and mechanisms of 'coping' will be presented in the following sections of this chapter.

## 5.2 Energy and Threats to Comfort

### 5.2.1 Introducing Theme Two

The previous findings chapter concluded that establishing a sense of the independent home was closely linked to the participants' understanding and experiences of comfort. Interestingly, although participants situated 'comfort' as a priority in establishing the independent home, thermal comfort, or the ability to provide and sustain adequate warmth, was seldom noted. Participants did disclose some experiences of living in cold homes and the impacts of such experiences, however across the interviews, thermal comfort was not presented as a priority issue. In fact, the way in which young adult households used and paid for domestic energy appeared to be characterised by a much more dynamic and complex relationship, than one solely concerned with warmth. The second master theme, 'threats to comfort', presents four distinct energy-related challenges, or 'threats', which emerged from the participants' accounts. These included: the widespread presence of 'damp and mould', challenging 'laundry practices', fear of 'the unexpected bill', and 'disconnection' (see *Table 5.1* overleaf). The following sections will discuss the findings in relation to these four sub-themes.

Table 5.1 Theme two

Theme Two: Energy Vulnerability and Threats to Home Comfort	
Threats	1. Damp and mould
	2. Laundry practices
	3. The 'unexpected' bill
	4. Disconnection

### 5.2.2 Damp and Mould

As noted in the previous chapter, the energy efficiency, or inefficiency, of the home was not referred to directly by any of the participants. However, poor household conditions alluding to experiences of living in energy inefficient homes were frequently conveyed. The most documented of these conditions commented on the widespread exposure to damp and mould present across past, and for one participant, present properties. Experiences were not distinct to any particular phase in the participants' housing pathways, and included homes they had independently managed, as well as their 'parental homes' and 'temporary homes'.

The form and severity of damp and mould varied. For some the issue was isolated to a single room, most frequently a bedroom or the bathroom, while for others the problem was prevalent across more substantial areas of the property. Some participants described the issue as a build-up of condensation on the walls and around windows, while others outlined visible black marks and a resulting smell. In the excerpt below, Tracy highlights the severity of the issue in her current property, as well as revealing her negative outlook regarding the likelihood of finding a resolution.



*Yeh, we've got mould on the insides of our windows in every single room. It's because our vent is blocked up. And the agency just says it's old, because of the flat...it doesn't look that old though. And they said to us when we phoned up about it in the first winter we were here, um, to...that was that year when we had no money, I suppose...they said to keep the heating on low all the time. That's how you get rid of the mould. (Tracy)*

Despite asserting a level of confidence in the cause of the problem, “*it's because our vent is blocked up*”, Tracy demonstrates frustration and hopelessness in resolving the issue. Her frustration is justified by the length of time the issue has been endured in the property: “*in the first winter we were here*”. Presenting two contentious issues, she further illustrates her lack of hope in being able to resolve the issue. One implicates the role of others, in this case the estate agent, or “*the agency*”, while the other positions the proposed ‘solution’, to “*keep the heating on low all the time*”, as one that is unrealistic due to a lack of financial resources.

It is within this excerpt that Tracy also highlights a key issue presented by a number of the participants. The relationship between tenants and those who own or manage the properties (i.e. landlords and estate agents) is mostly presented as strained and problematic. A lack of sincere or constructive communication was highlighted by several participants as the greatest barrier in overcoming issues in the home, which mostly concerned issues related to the presence of damp and mould. This interpretation, whereby tenant-landlord communication is portrayed as strained or disjointed, and most often the landlord or estate agent's viewpoint is dissenting from that of the tenants, was commonly referred to within the participants' accounts. Poor tenant relations have been

highlighted in previous fuel poverty research (Middlemiss and Gillard, 2015; Bouzarovski *et al.*, 2013; Harrington *et al.*, 2004; Ambrose, 2015a) where findings have similarly identified a failure to properly respond or deal with complaints regarding damp.

The presence of a poor landlord-tenant relationship was not distinguishable between tenure type and participants similarly voiced examples of poor experiences within social housing, as well as in privately rented properties. As Rehana highlights in the excerpt below:

*I had my daughter in Sept and then we moved out three months later into [new property], because the damp was that bad in my bedroom. It was behind the wardrobe in my bedroom, my clothes were getting mouldy because the damp was penetrating through the wardrobe, form the back of the wardrobe. It was that bad. We told the council, they did nothing. So, we moved out. (Rehana)*

Left with no perceived alternative, despite reporting the issue to the landlord, Rehana outlines that her family had no other option than to move out of the property, consequently moving into the private rented sector. This example illuminates the distinct lack of power young adults perceive themselves to have as tenants.

In contrast, revealing a positive experience in social housing, Janet highlighted that, for her, local regeneration had provided the opportunity to move into a newly built property, consequently allowing her to overcome some of the common issues outlined, including damp and mould:

*Yeh, I was actually waiting for a new build because I didn't have...I didn't want to have damp in the house and I wanted to have a warm house because the heating didn't work in the last house, so... (Janet)*

Earlier in the analysis an interpretative relationship between 'old' and 'cold' was noted. This perspective was similarly reflected in narratives concerning damp and mould, where 'old' properties were perceived as the most problematic in this regard. In contrast, as highlighted by Janet above, newly built properties had the potential to offer a damp and mould free environment, one that, where possible, was worth "*waiting for*". Tracy further supports the understanding that with older properties comes a greater risk of exposure to challenges, where, in an earlier excerpt, she outlined that estate agents attributed the presence of damp and mould to the age of the property: "*And the agency just says it's old, because of the flat...it doesn't look that old though*".

Participants suggest that there is avoidance or neglect from those who they believe should take responsibility for the damp and mould in their properties (i.e. housing providers or those managing the properties) which is often evaded by presenting the issue as a consequence of age, a factor that neither tenant nor housing provider can alter. As highlighted by Tracy and Rehana, responses to their requests for help are either being met with avoidance or neglect, or not being met at all. This observation supports the findings from earlier work, where tenants perceived the options available to them as extremely limited, and consequently presented feelings of powerlessness as "*council or private tenants who had to rely on an unresponsive landlord*" (Harrington et al, 2004, p.266).

Presenting landlords and housing providers as neglectful with regards to damp and mould was not isolated to the participants' experiences as existing tenants; as prospective tenants also, the participants revealed an alarming level of distrust in housing providers and those managing properties, such as estate agents. For the participants, mould represented a symptom of severe damp which was visible and therefore identifiable. However when narrating experiences of viewing properties, the household malady was described as something hidden, almost subterranean. As Rehana highlights in the excerpt below, housing providers and estates agents could not be trusted to disclose such issues with prospective properties, therefore the certain strategies were employed, specifically developed with the intention of uncovering damp and mould before entering into a tenancy agreement.

*Yeh I'm looking inside kitchen cupboards to see how the back of the cupboards are. Erm, I am looking for damp and I'm actually smelling for damp as well but in the summer it is hard to detect damp anyway because it's...it clears out in the summer don't it, so in the winter it is easier to smell it. Looking at the roof, more than anything, that's one...they're, they're key facts that I look for in a house. The roof, to see if it's all been done, the gutters, to see if they have been done and all that because I don't want to move into a house and then oh god there's been a leak in the ceiling, or the gutters need doing and its causing damp in my bedroom, or...because that can all cause damp and that's one thing I don't need. (Rehana)*

Presented again as an unresolvable issue, damp and mould may be endured by residents for duration of the tenancy; an issue that Rehana perceives as passed on from one tenant to the next. Past experiences have illustrated to the participants that reactive strategies

have failed to offer any reasonable solutions, therefore, from Rehana's perspective, a proactive approach is required. Expressing an unwillingness to be 'caught out', Rehana details her strategic approach in a way that asserts a level of expertise which has been gained as a result of multiple negative experiences. She is clear and confident in detailing her search strategies, and this is presented in a way that demonstrates her attempts to reclaim a sense of power over those, namely landlords and housing providers, who have failed to help her as tenant in the past. Through her language, Rehana is constructing her identity as an experienced tenant. Research has suggested that where available agentic capacities, such as self-esteem and perceived control, are utilised it can result in clearer identity formation (Schwartz, Cote & Arnett, 2005).

Notably, Rehana concludes with the statement: *"that's the one thing I don't need"*, revealing that despite attempts to reclaim power, there is still a sense of vulnerability. Rehana narrates her day-to-day life as extremely demanding, presenting and combining various perceived responsibilities as a mother, a partner and an independent household member. She expresses that her lived experience is already consumed by a considerable amount of commitments and responsibilities, positioning the challenges associated with damp and mould as unneeded and unwelcomed.

While the challenges associated with damp and mould were linked to considerable psychological concerns, Rehana was the only participant who noted the negative effects damp and mould had on her own physical health.

*Well I'm asthmatic you see, so having damp in the room where you are, it cause your asthma to set off, plus you get more colds and coughs and what not, so it's the chest infections really, that the damp causes. (Rehana)*

Awareness of the issue extended outside of the participants' own homes and examples of the substantial and unrelenting challenges experienced by relatives with poor health who were living in damp conditions, were also highlighted. The most severe of these examples was again noted by Rehana, whose mother was living with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). The following excerpt details the considerable efforts that had been made to eradicate the problem in her home, again evidencing frustration regarding a lack of support from housing providers.

*Me Mum has got COPD. It's a lung condition, and her bathroom and the bedroom are full of it and all they keep saying is it is condensation. Open the windows. Whereas my Mum has the windows open all the time to let the fresh air in because obviously she has got COPD, so they won't do anything about that. And it's been like that now for about two and half years, maybe longer. And it's literally black, all of the ceiling. So, yeh she has painted it, she has used damp proof paint, everything, it's just they won't do anything to help. (Rehana)*

Documenting one of the most severe cases of damp and mould, Rehana demonstrates an awareness of potential causes and ameliorative strategies; however, in her mother's experience, efforts to date have failed to resolve the issue. Notably, Rehana demonstrates that a relationship between indoor moisture and damp is recognised and understood, evidencing 'good' household behaviours: "*my Mum has the windows open all of the time*".

However, for her, the enduring exposure to damp and mould is attributed to the housing provider's failure to fully investigate.

This section has outlined the way in which damp and mould in the home presents a significant threat to the comfort of the participants in their own home, as well as in the homes of others such as relatives. Some participants demonstrated an awareness that the key causes of damp are linked to excessive indoor moisture and poor ventilation; however, landlords and housing providers are positioned as the most challenging barrier to overcome. Despite multiple request for help, as well as attempts to independently deal with the issue, participants perceived themselves and other households exposed to damp and mould as powerless in this regard. In contrast, those positioned with power, such as the housing providers and estate agents were failing, from the participants' perspectives, to accept responsibility for the issue and take appropriate action. In this way, accountability was positioned solely upon housing providers and estate agents. Conversely, the potential impacts that individual or household behaviours may have on the presence of damp and mould in the home, received very little attention.

### 5.2.3 Laundry Practices

Discourse relating to cleanliness and domesticity in the home was dominated by one household task in particular: the process of 'doing laundry', or more specifically the practice of drying clothes. Presented by a number of the participants as a particularly challenging domestic duty, narratives exploring the experiences of laundry practices were frequently utilised by the participants to demonstrate an awareness of energy use in the home. 'Doing laundry' was not constructed as a threat to comfort in terms of high energy

costs, for example as a result of using a washing machine or tumble dryer. Instead, the participants revealed that the challenges of carrying out laundry were more commonly linked to negative impacts this had on their private living space, predominantly as a result of having to dry clothes indoors. Notably, links between drying laundry indoors and damp and mould prevalence were noted by a number of the participants, and will be discussed in a later part of this subsection.

All of the participants were currently or had previously lived in a flat, which meant they were unable to access outdoor space, consequently drying their washing by hanging it up inside the home. Such practices were viewed as undesirable, unsightly and a nuisance within the living space. Furthermore, the participants frequently noted that this resulted in no alternative but to use heating systems, not as a means of staying warm, but in order to dry laundry. This represented a particularly troubling dilemma for Tracy, as outlined in the excerpt below:

*Um, in the winter well I suppose you would put in on...to dry the bloody clothes. I really want a washing line in the new house! I'm really, what I'm looking forward to...having a washing line so I suppose you don't have to put the heating on because you are drying your clothes outside. Like, we had the heating on the other day and it's warm! It's not like...cold. But we had to do it. (Tracy)*

Disclosing an imminent move from a flat to a privately rented house, which will provide access to a garden and the prospect of a washing line, Tracy situates the challenge of 'doing laundry' as one restricted to the type of property she rents at present. The incongruous use of the heating system, when not cold, is justified by her perception of



having no alternative. Tracy uses the collective 'we', "*we had the heating on*" and "*we had to do it*", to situate this undesirable practice as a household behaviour, not an individual one. However, when narrating foresight of a desirable alternative (i.e. the washing line), Tracy uses the individual 'I' to stress her personal intention to take up, what she perceives, as a more appropriate laundry practice.

For some of the participants, the use of the heating system as a means of 'doing laundry' created tensions between members of the household:

*I try to switch the lights off when I go out of the room. I don't heat as much. [Ex-partner] was...he was crazy with the heating. He was, because he likes it when it's warm. He would put it on full and like it was like a sauna in the house all of the time, and he would blame it on the kids or the laundry. (Janet)*

In Janet's household in particular, it is suggested that certain uses of the heating are perceived as acceptable and necessary, namely: adequate warmth for the children, and drying the laundry. Her narrative exposes excessive energy consumption by her ex-partner who, as a result of such household perceptions, '*blames*' his own individual behaviours on uses of the heating system deemed to be acceptable. Janet's account is not unique in this respect: 'irresponsible' energy practices, such as excessive use of the heating system, are only narrated by the participants as behaviours they have observed in others. A failure to disclose inefficient uses of energy for which the participants themselves are responsible may reflect efforts to manage their self-concept and avoid disclosure of stigmatising energy-behaviours (Hards, 2013).

Presenting a sense of responsibility in this respect was also applied to the use of a tumble dryer, where Rehana highlighted her efforts to limit energy consumption brought about by laundry practices: *“I didn’t use my dryer as much. I only used my dryer for the kid’s clothes, and things like that. That was it really, because I only used what I needed, basically”* (Rehana). As noted earlier in the literature review, prioritisation of energy uses among low-income young parents in particular has resulted in the needs of the children in the household being considered more important than the needs of adult household members (Harrington *et al.*, 2004).

The process of drying laundry indoors is recognised as a key cause of damp, mould and condensation in the home, resulting from excess indoor moisture and/or poor ventilation (NHS, 2015). Participants identified a link between this household practice and the high incidence of damp and mould in their properties: *“...like the student house used to stink of damp and that was because I had my clothes everywhere”* (Tracy), however for many of the participants, the issue was particularly problematic whereby a perceived absence of an alternative approach to doing laundry was combined with a sense of powerlessness.

One aspect which was evident across the participants’ narratives concerning both damp and mould and laundry practices, was characterised by an unpleasant ‘smell’. This was most frequently narrated in relation to laundry practices whereby the resultant ‘smell’ had the greatest impact on householders’ clothes. Participants noted considerable concern regarding ‘the smell’, which for Jo, as highlighted in the excerpt below, was caused by the severe damp problem encountered while living in student accommodation:

*One thing I really didn't like was because it was damp there was a smell of damp so it would get onto all of your clothes and things. You couldn't really smell it because you lived in it but I was really self-conscious at first thinking 'oh everyone can smell, can probably smell that my clothes are really damp' but I'm sort of...I'm not too worried about what people think, in general, so it didn't bother me too much but that was one of the things that I didn't like the most. (Jo)*

For Janet, changes to her laundry practices, from hanging clothes to dry indoors to the use of a tumble dryer, had proven successful in eliminating the issue:

*Interviewer: How does laundry work in your house?*

*Janet: Now I have got a dryer. Because of my mum. Because my mum hated it when she was coming to my house and there was clothes hanging all over the house and she convinced me to get one [laughs].*

*Interviewer: Are you noticing benefits?*

*Janet: Oh, it's so much better, it's like miles better. And the clothes don't stink. Because they, sometimes clothes don't dry quickly enough, they get 'the smell'.*

Janet illustrates the prevailing role her mother plays in her decision making as an independent adult. She narrates her decision to purchase a tumble dryer as one imposed upon her, however her use of the word “convinced” and subsequent disclosure of a success story, “oh, it's so much better”, suggests her mother's opinions are considered invaluable. Many of the participants positioned their parents as trusted advisors and as key actors within their support network, as Tracy and Jo highlight in the excerpts below.

For Tracy, her Dad, as a trusted contact, was able to confirm previously disputed advice offered by her landlord. For Jo, her parents support extended beyond financial needs during a time of crisis, following the end of employment.

*They [estate agents] said to keep the heating on low all the time. That's how you get rid of the mould. But then when I rang my dad that is what he said as well (Tracy)*

*We turned to my parents for support. not so much, not so much financial, they did give us a little bit of money to help but it was more, almost emotional support that we needed. (Jo)*

The interviewees revealed an interesting perspective regarding the perceived threats and challenges associated with 'doing laundry'. Unexpectedly, participants did not disclose a sense of vulnerability regarding laundry practices in terms of cost implications, for example, the burden of increased energy costs as a result of operating a washing machine or tumble dryer. However, as will be discussed in the following section, energy bills and household finances, more broadly, did represent a significant challenge to energy vulnerability in the lived experience of the participants.

#### 5.2.4 The Unexpected Bill

Money represented a dominant theme across the participants' narratives. Portrayed as a constant strain and source of worry, this finding was not wholly unexpected due to the sampling criteria adopted. All of the participants voiced past experiences of financial hardship, which for many were linked to periods of unstable income and unemployment.

Instability of household income, one of the six key challenges to energy vulnerability proposed by Middlemiss and Gillard (2015), played a critical role in the participants' attitudes towards managing household finances overall. However, while a number of issues regarding the instability of household income (for example, the loss of employment, delays on benefit claims and payments, etc.) were highlighted, the participants' concerns were significantly more focused on the instability of household outgoings. Domestic energy bills and food costs were at the centre of these concerns, documenting the common dilemma of 'heat' or 'eat' experienced by fuel poor households.

As outlined in the methodology, a loosely-structured interview guide was utilised to explore six broad discussion areas in particular. Two of these areas invited the participants to disclose their perceptions and experiences of the financial aspects of managing a home (i.e. essential household costs, budgeting and household income), as well as a more focused exploration of domestic energy usage and billing. It emerged from the data that domestic energy bills were considered as one of the most '*essential*' household costs (without prompting, most of the participants identified that gas and electricity bills were among the top three essential household outgoings). At the same time, participants highlighted that, when living independently, gas and electricity bills were the most problematic.

Most of the participants lived in properties with both gas and electricity supply, paying for their fuel by using a PPM or a credit meter where costs were paid via an arranged monthly direct debit. Comparisons made with other household expenditure, such as rent and council tax, highlighted that domestic energy bills were the most problematic due

their variability and unpredictability, as noted earlier. Portrayed by some participants as similar to the household's food costs, gas and electricity bills were constructed as a threat to the household's ability to effectively manage income and outgoings on a regular basis.

As outlined in the previous section of the analysis, the participants' did not clearly demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between domestic energy *consumption* and *cost*. For example, where excessive consumption was noted (as with Janet's ex-partner, outlined earlier in the analysis), this was not communicated as a concern in terms of increased energy costs resulting from an increase in use of energy services. Instead, the inconsistency of domestic energy costs, particularly with regards to the participants' experiences of unaffordable energy bills, was positioned as something out of their control – a household cost which they were unable to predict, or prepare for. This manifested in the participants' narratives as a fear of the '*unexpected bill*'.

Five of the six participants had experience of paying for their gas and electricity through a pre-payment meter (PPM); four were currently paying via this method, while one participant had recently switched to monthly payments following a move to a different property. In the excerpt below, Tracy illustrates the level of concern caused by the prospect of monthly energy bills, highlighting the benefits, for her, of using a PPM.

*I feel like I'm in control of it when I'm using the PPM because I've paid that much.*

*They are not going to scam me off, and I've paid £10 on my meter. I am not in debt.*

*I am not like...so when you're money runs out you put enough on to cover the emergency and what you need. So a direct debit, or a bill coming through the post and it might be, it might be £200, or it might be four hundred and something, I don't know what it's going to be. And that scares me because I am not sure. (Tracy)*

In relation to the definition of energy vulnerability proposed by Middlemiss and Gillard (2015), this excerpt highlights that *“the capacity that household has to adapt to changes in fuel poverty”* is a critical concern for Tracy. Driven by a fear of the unknown, *“and that scares me because I am not sure”*, the option to pay for her energy using a PPM offers a sense of reassurance and a perceived ability to stay *“in control”* of this household cost.

Furthermore, this example illustrates the problematic relationship participants portrayed between themselves as consumers and energy suppliers. Depicted as similar to that of housing providers and estate agents, the relationship with the energy companies was presented as one consumed by deviance, dishonesty and a lack of empathy. As Tracy voiced, continuing to pay her domestic energy bills through a PPM avoided the potential for her to be *“scammed off”*.

However, for other participants, the use of a PPM did not provide any added sense of protection against *‘deviant’* energy supplier practices. Janet opted to change her method of payment, from a PPM to a monthly direct debit due to a poor experiences with the former payment method, which for her was: *“quite expensive. And they take like £3 charge for nothing really. So it’s not very good”*. From this perspective, it demonstrates that, although a more desirable payment method for many of the participants, PPM’s were similarly unable to protect consumers from unexpected charges. For Janet, attempts to overcome the issue by switching her payment method from a PPM to a credit meter had resulted in arguably more problematic issues, as she outlines in the excerpt below.

*Janet: At the beginning I arranged with British Gas to pay by direct debit and they said the price would be seventy odd pounds for both gas and electric per month, so*

*this is what I was expecting and each month I paid it, and then suddenly they changed the amount to £115, or fifty I believe, I can't even remember, I'm not sure.*

*Interviewer: so almost doubled? Thereabouts.*

*Janet: yeh, yeh. But they never told me. They never gave me notice and I received bank charges so I just cancelled the direct debit. And I did ring...to tell them off.*

As a result, Janet had accrued substantial debts on both her gas and electricity accounts; at the time of being interviewed repayment arrangements were in place for both. What is striking in Janet's experience, in particular, is that neither rising energy costs nor a reduction in household income were positioned as the cause of debt. For her, domestic energy had not become 'unaffordable'. Instead, poor communication and customer service has led to a breakdown in the consumer-supplier relationship; the sole reason outlined in justification for cancelling her regular payments. With approximately 1.5 million electricity and 1.4 million gas accounts in debt in the UK (Ofgem, 2014), this perspective raises interesting questions regarding the circumstances that lead to households accruing fuel debts, as well as the ensuing experiences of managing accounts that have fallen into arrears.

A lack of consumer knowledge regarding domestic energy consumption, conservation and costing has been noted in previous research (Hedges, 1996; Harrington *et al.*, 2004), with similar findings also emerging from research focused on the experiences of young adult households (Bouzarovski *et al.*, 2013). As highlighted in the literature review, energy billing in particular has received much criticism, with energy suppliers labelled as the "worst offenders" for producing confusing household bills (Martinelli, 2014). To some



extent, a lack of knowledge related to energy practices and billing in the home may offer an explanation as to why participants failed to identify or present a clear link between their understanding of their own domestic energy consumption and their fuel bills. In particular, this was evidenced by a number of the participants when making reference to the process of providing the energy supplier with a meter reading.

Though many of the participants outlined that knowledge and expertise regarding domestic energy bills were generally gained as a direct result of their experiences as independent household members, the interviews revealed that for some this didn't always begin at the point of moving out of the parental home. Again highlighted by Tracy's experience, the first three years of living independently were spent in university accommodation, in which her tenancy agreement incorporated the contractual term of 'all bills included'. A fairly typical system found in student accommodation in particular, Tracy made regular fixed payments directly to the landlord which covered many essential household costs, including rent, fuel bills, and internet costs, among others. An increasing number of non-student, young adult renters are similarly exposed to such household billing practices, particularly in the UK's current housing climate where 'flat-sharing' or renting a room in a house in multiple occupation is considered, for many, the only affordable option. In the excerpt below, Tracy highlights how this resulted in a lack of preparedness prior to her transition into an independent home:

*I suppose the difference between moving out of halls and moving into the house where you had to pay bills, because halls was 'all bills included', and I paid...I suppose you didn't really think about it because it just came out of your loan. So you paid £98 a week. That was so cheap, my halls now is like £125 a week. Holy Jesus. And then*

*moving into my house and getting a gas bill with your name on it is a really weird experience. Shit, have I actually got to pay this? And it's like I'm responsible for this, oh my god, where do I find the money for this? (Tracy)*

Tracy makes sense of her experience of the 'all bills included' system by drawing from her understanding of a previous alternative identity – in this case, as a student. Again noting on the use of the collective 'you', as in "*you didn't really think about it because it just came out of your loan*", Tracy situates her own understanding as one that can be generalised to a wider population among those who identify as students, and to some extent, also among those who have experience of the 'all bills included' system.

This may illustrate a major challenge faced by young adults renting under such tenancy agreements, whereby the visibility of energy use and costing in the home remain hidden from them for substantial periods of time early on in their housing careers. Interestingly, once a bill is presented in her own name, Tracy's language reverts to using the individual 'I'. She exposes a sense of vulnerability in this regard, narrating her experiences of domestic energy bills as something which once required little or no thought at all, to a household cost for which she is now solely responsible and accountable for. Tracy's portrayal of the psychological strain caused by receiving a personalised gas bill further documents the participants' wider perception that domestic energy costs, in particular, present significant challenges in a householders' ability to plan or budget their financial resources.

Considering the potential to better prepare young adults with regards to their understanding and awareness of energy billing, the circumstances of another participant, Adam, posed a potentially critical opportunity in supporting this demographic in their

transition to the independent home. Adam was an exception to the other participants in that his current property was one of the 3.1 million households in England not connected to the gas network (Consumer Focus, 2011). Figures show that the prevalence of fuel poverty is greater among such households, in part due to an increased reliance on more expensive, electric heating systems. In the UK, the latest figures reported an estimated 14% of 'off-gas' households currently living in fuel poverty, compared to 10% of households with both a gas and electricity supply (DECC, 2015). Interestingly, Adam's experience was also an exception in terms of the level of concern his energy bills caused, with him noting that, at present, he found his domestic energy costs to be "*no problem*".

Presenting an unusual challenge in comparison to the other participants, Adam's overall expenditure on fuel was significantly lower than that of any other interviewee, yet his experience of his energy bills caused no real concern. With a total weekly fuel expenditure of only £5 per week, Adam illustrated that for him, low-levels of fuel consumption were considered to be adequate due to a lack of furniture or household appliances, as he outlined in the following excerpt:

*Interviewer: Did you get help with that?*

*Adam: Furniture? Not yet, I did apply. Still waiting. I have bed, yeh, yeh, just bed and drawers, three drawers and a bedside table. Would like a sofa, sofa is important. And a fridge, cooker... Very important, these items.*

Adam had moved out of the parental home only a few months prior to the interview, having been allocated a one-bedroom, unfurnished flat following a lengthy wait on the social housing list. Due to limited financial resources (his only income at the time was jobseekers allowance for an adult under the age of twenty-five), Adam had spent the first

three months in the independent home unable to purchase any 'essential' household appliances. Consequently, electricity consumption was only used for lighting, hot water and to charge a mobile phone. Adam had submitted several applications for assistance to gain essential household appliances to various local organisations and his housing provider, however was still awaiting responses. The critical opportunity presented here, in Adam's experience, relates to his awareness of the impact household appliances will have on his energy needs and costs in the near future.

*Interviewer: Is £5 enough?*

*Adam: At this moment. I don't know for future you know...for gas, TV, washing machine? At this moment, £5 is ok.*

Despite revealing a significant lack of energy functioning in the home, Adam did not conceive of himself as living in fuel poverty. Considering the proposed definition of energy vulnerability, however, this example highlights a critical challenge concerning a household's 'adaptive capacity' to changes in fuel poverty. Adam identifies the potential for increased vulnerability in the near future, for example where increased energy needs and costs as a result of gaining additional household appliances may pose a threat to comfort in terms of affordability.

This section of the findings has highlighted that money represents a persistent strain and source of worry in the participants' lived experience. Notably, while the participants did discuss problems with household income, the dominant concern for them is the irregularity and instability of particular household outgoings. This perceived sense of an inability to control aspects of the household's finances emerged from the analysis as a fear of the unexpected bill, and for some of the participants this concern formed a key

factor in choosing which payment method to utilise in covering the household's domestic energy costs.

The findings here highlight potential opportunities with regards to better preparing young adult households in terms their relationship with and understanding of domestic energy in the independent home. For example the participants' narratives have demonstrated that they would benefit from clearer information about the processes involved with meter readings, as well as improvements in the clarity of energy charges and billing practices. In addition, the findings here also illustrate that, as yet, very little is known regarding the impacts of tenancies which operate under the increasingly common 'all bills included' contractual terms; therefore making energy uses and costs seemingly 'invisible'.

### 5.2.5 Disconnection

For non-payment of gas and electricity debts, the most extreme power energy suppliers have is to disconnect the gas or electricity supply to the property, leaving the household without the most basic of energy services such as lighting, hot water or heating. Regarded as a method of debt enforcement which should only be used as a last resort, Child Poverty Action Group (2014) have worryingly noted that *"suppliers sometimes find it difficult to distinguish between deliberate non-payment and those who would pay but are suffering financial hardship or other problems"* (p.115). However, figures reveal that the use of this enforcement tactic has all but entirely diminished<sup>3</sup> in recent years (CPAG, 2014).

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<sup>3</sup> In 2003 there were 15,973 disconnections of gas and 1,361 for electricity. Between January and March 2013, there were only nine gas disconnections and 71 electricity disconnections in the UK. AS CPAG (2014) note, however, this only represents a tiny proportion of the total gas and electricity accounts in arrears.

Despite some participants reporting energy debts on their gas and/or electricity accounts, none of the participants had experiences of being disconnected by their energy suppliers. Notably, however, of the five participants who outlined past or present experience of using a PPM, three reported instances of self-disconnection. Self-disconnection, as noted previously, occurs when all available credit on a PPM has been exhausted, leaving the household without a gas or electricity supply (Rocha, Baddeley & Pollitt, 2013). Somewhat predictably, all of the participants who disclosed periods of self-disconnection stated that such action (or inaction) was a result of exhausted financial resources. In the excerpt below, Janet illustrates a fairly typical experience highlighted by those participants who reported self-disconnection:

*Janet: sometimes I wouldn't have electricity at home because I didn't have any money. So yeh...*

*Interviewer: what happens then, at home?*

*Janet: then you just wait for the best to happen. I mean I was waiting, at the time, for my ex to get some money from someone and then to top up the electricity.*

Here, Janet highlights very little capacity to act; without money, she has no other option but to endure a period of time in which the property is without an electricity supply, and therefore without any services reliant on this supply (i.e. lighting). Essentially, in this regard, she perceives herself to be powerless. Interestingly, Janet appears to use her language in a way that mediates her vulnerability. In her initial statement, “*you just wait for the best to happen*”, she briefly exposes this sense of vulnerability. However, the tone quickly changes, in that she highlights the impermanence of the issue for her and her family, asserting that actually, in this situation, self-disconnection was not an experience

to be endured indefinitely. In this regard, Janet appears to be managing her self-concept in a way that demonstrates a greater level of resilience. Research has highlighted that in developing “*a positive self-concept, individuals may be well set up to maintain competence (i.e. demonstrate a resilient outcome) under a range of seemingly different kinds of adversities*” (Olsson, Bond, Burns, Vella-Brodrick, & Sawyer, 2003). In this case, the discursive switch from vulnerability to resilience may evidence one strategy employed by young adult households’ in terms of their ability to cope with fuel poverty- and energy-related challenges.

Motivations for avoiding instances of self-disconnection revealed an interesting concern among many of the participants: their narrative accounts suggested that the greatest fear of disconnection from energy services could be more accurately characterised by a fear of disconnection in a social sense. As Tracy highlights in the excerpt below, for her, electricity is essential due to the services it provides, which in this case centres on her ability to stay connected with others:

*...you can't have internet, you can't have hot water, and you can't have a shower in my flat without electricity. You can't do anything. You can't charge your phone. Which most people see as a priority, is having a mobile phone which it is, because how the fuck do you contact people if you don't have internet, if you don't have a phone. So yeh, paying for your electricity has got to be the top one. Putting £10 on the meter and then knowing that there's £5 emergency if you need it. (Tracy)*

Positioning access to the internet and ownership of a mobile phone as essential demonstrates the need to stay connected with others. In this excerpt, Tracy’s choice of language emphasises her concern and exposes a sense of vulnerability with regards to the

threat of being disconnected. Referring to the provision of 'emergency' credit indicates that, from her perspective, being connected is strongly related to her sense of security and safety in the independent home, which as noted in the previous chapter, emerged as a key characteristic in establishing their identity as an independent household member.

This perspective is not unique to Tracy's experience; when discussing essential household costs, all of the participants, except one, listed the internet and/or a phone as crucial. Also, the connection between the need for electricity and the service it provides (i.e. without electricity, a household cannot have the internet) was similarly noted by others. For example, as Janet listed: "*gas and electricity. If you work from home then you have to have the internet...[and] phone*". In addition, as illustrated with Adam's experience earlier, among the very few uses of electricity he had in the home, one of these was to ensure he was able to charge his mobile phone. This highlights a key aspect of the participants' relationship with energy, demonstrating that, particularly in terms of having access to the internet and a mobile phone, electricity forms an essential household bill because of the services it provides.

As highlighted in Chapter Four, the housing pathways from the parental homes, to temporary homes, and later into the independent home, which the participants described, were extremely dynamic and complex. None of the participants had followed the same trajectory and also, none of the participants had grown up in the city in which they currently lived. This created distance from their parental homes, a place which, as noted earlier, offered a sense of security and comfort. In this regard, this finding may demonstrate the participants' awareness of such distance from trusted contacts and key members of their support network.



### 5.2.6 Summary of Theme Two

The previous sections of this chapter have introduced four distinct ‘threats to comfort’ identified by the participants in relation to their understanding of and relationship with domestic energy in the home. With regards to the emergent findings, it seems that energy- or fuel poverty-related challenges among the participants are less focused on issues regarding thermal comfort, or other basic energy services such as lighting or hot water, and instead are situated within a more complex and dynamic set of processes and practices in their lived experience. This chapter has highlighted that young adult households face many challenges in dealing with energy-related threats to comfort. Arguably the greatest barrier to overcoming such challenges is characterised by a sense of powerlessness. In particular, this concerns their limited capacity to act in terms of the energy inefficiency of the properties they typically occupy. Seemingly sustaining this powerlessness are two actors in particular: landlords or housing providers, and energy suppliers.

However, throughout the findings chapters, the participants’ accounts have illustrated a number of mechanisms and strategies employed by the young adult householders as a way of coping or responding to such energy- or fuel poverty-related challenges. The following section will discuss these mechanisms in greater detail, introducing the third and final master theme, ‘energy and coping’.

## 5.3 Energy and Coping

### 5.3.1 Introducing Theme Three

Forming the third and final master theme, mechanisms of ‘coping’ refers to a range of mechanisms or strategies employed by householders as a way of coping with threats to comfort. Such strategies were generally presented by the participants in two ways: as behavioural or psychological strategies (see *Table 5.2*). However, the analysis revealed that many of the strategies were multifaceted and in many ways interrelated. In this way, certain behaviours were used to influence or reframe the participants’ interpretations of threats or challenges, and conversely, certain psychological or perceptual strategies triggered certain coping behaviours.

*Table 5.2 Theme three*

Theme Three: Energy and Coping	
Mechanisms	1. Behavioural mechanisms
	2. Psychological mechanisms

### 5.3.2 Behavioural Mechanisms

In Chapter Two, the literature review discussed mechanisms of coping employed by households as a way of managing their experiences of cold homes and energy-related threats. In broad terms, three main mechanisms were introduced which included: reducing fuel use, going without other necessities, and incurring debt. Some of these strategies were similarly presented by the participants in this research, most predominantly in relation to their understanding of threats to home comfort. The

following sections will introduce some of these findings which emerged from the participants' narratives of coping.

*(a) Coping strategy or habit?*

Concerns regarding thermal comfort or the ability to achieve adequate warmth were not highlighted as a dominant concern by any of the participants; particularly evidenced in the previous section, where energy-related 'threats' disclosed by the participants were more focused on issues regarding challenges with the quality of the dwelling (i.e. damp), the ability to perform every day domestic tasks (i.e. laundry practices), the processes and unpredictability of paying for energy, and a fear of disconnection beyond only deprivation of the energy supply itself.

However, some references to experiences of living in a cold home were made, and where such experiences were noted, one coping behaviour was repeatedly presented. Demonstrating that efforts were made to avoid using the (costly) heating systems, participants described how they would use the sofa, sometimes sitting alone and at other times with other members of the household, as a site of comfort, and most importantly, as a place where they could get warm. During exceptionally colder periods, some of the participants also noted on the use of blankets as an extra means of improving their overall thermal comfort.

The use of blankets to endure colder conditions in the home, outside of typical hours a householder would normally spend in bed, is not a unique finding to this research (Brunner, Spitzer, & Christanell, 2012). Studies have suggested that using a blanket as a means of staying warm may actually be interpreted by some as a positive experience: "*the thought of slipping under their favourite blanket is a pleasant idea*" (Brunner, Spitzer, &

Christanell, 2012, p.55). However, an interesting perspective noted by one participant in this research, highlighted an awareness of how a *coping* behaviour had, in fact, become a habit, even during times when not cold:

*I sit on my parents' sofa if I go home at the weekend, if I go home and I sit on my parents' sofa and I'm like "um?". Even though I know it's not, it's boiling hot in their house because they have the heating on all the time now...but I'm sitting there and I'm like "I want a blanket". Oh my god, is that so weird? (Tracy)*

Tracy demonstrates a realisation that this behaviour has transitioned from what was once a coping strategy into a habit. Emphasising that this behaviour is no longer regarded as a mechanism of coping, she exaggerates the warm conditions of her parent's home: "*it's boiling hot*" and "*they have the heating on all the time*". This finding raises important questions regarding how issues of 'recognition' among young adult households living in or at risk of fuel poverty may be linked to their understanding of what behaviours are considered to be coping mechanisms, and conversely, what behaviours are perceived simply as habitual. In this regard, an important consideration may be: if Tracy now perceives her use of a blanket as a '*weird*' habit, what implications might this have in terms of recognising cold or fuel poverty related conditions in the future? Again, this finding supports the assertion that subjective measures of fuel poverty are critical, particularly for generating and more comprehensive understanding of people's relationship with domestic energy.

#### *(b) Coping through compromise*

The most commonly disclosed mechanism of coping to emerge from the analysis was a strong sense that the participants' lives as independent adults were consumed by

processes of negotiation and compromise. Compromise was mostly narrated in terms of 'fragile financial management' (Brunner, Spitzer, & Christanell, 2012), where limited financial resources had to be balanced between various needs, of both the participants and other household members.

In terms of domestic energy provision, for some of the participants such needs were positioned as non-negotiable, resulting in compromise over other essential needs, most commonly over the amount of money which could be spent on food. This perception was strongest among those who were parents, Janet and Rehana, where evidence of reducing energy consumption in the home was almost entirely absent. However, their narratives revealed that, if the household budget would allow, their decisions regarding 'the food shop' would change; consequently, with increased funds, this would allow the family to do the 'nice shop'. As Rehana outlines in the excerpt below, coping in this regard involved repeated experiences of sacrifice and renegotiation, particularly due to her perceived responsibilities as a parent:

*If we have got money then I'll shop somewhere else, like a Tesco's shop, and I'll do the nice shop where you've got nice food in, where as if you've not got the money, it'll be right, I'll get this for the kids and that for the kids, and it's mostly waffles, they are obsessed with waffles and sausages, stuff like that. Whereas I would like them to eat nicer things, but that's so, we would do a cheaper shop. Sometimes I have even got cheaper nappies, Aldi's nappies sometimes whereas I would like to see...I mean, these parents that have got, erm, cheap buggies, or cheap sandals on their kids feet and I don't want to be one of them parents...because that is what I had, the cheapest of everything, whereas I want my kids to have the best of everything. The*

*decent nappies, the decent dummies, the bottles...so even though it doesn't matter really, it's just the fact of...you know, my kids have got the best. So that really, we have had to compromise on the best for our kids, really. (Rehana)*

Experiences of compromise, as Rehana highlights here, cause considerable psychological concern. As introduced in the literature review, this finding evidences some degree of the 'heat or eat' dilemma being experienced by the participants (Beatty, Blow & Crossley, 2014). However, for Rehana, 'going without' is not considered a viable option, which therefore involves complex decision making processes and, as noted, repeated experiences of sacrifice regarding the standard she sets herself as a parent.

*(c) Using local charitable assistance*

In discussing the challenges low-income households face, Brunner, Spitzer, and Christanell (2012) noted that households will often employ a range of strategies to make the living space "*as homely as possible under the limited circumstances*" (p.55). One approach which was similarly highlighted by the participants was accessing household appliances and financial assistance from second-hand platforms, most often from local charities.

As outlined earlier, Adam, in particular, was relying on this avenue of support in his first experience of living independently. Adam's situation demonstrated the most significant example of domestic energy deprivation in that, for him, it wasn't the energy supply that was unaffordable, but the initial purchase of essential household appliances. At the time of the interview, Adam was awaiting decisions from several applications for help in this way.

Notably, accessing charitable support did not appear to present any problems for Adam, however, for another participant, Tracy, a reliance on charity presented a troubling dilemma, as she describes in the excerpt below:

*...but yeh, the fact that you have to go to a charity...but then I suppose that's a good thing that you are going to a charity to buy your furniture but...that's not an aspiration, is it, really? Of a young person, that you have to go to charity shop to buy the furniture. Um, we got our sofa in the Argos sale as well. It was the display sofa in Argos. (Tracy).*

Tracy demonstrates a conflict in her interpretation of charitable support, noting that in some regards buying furniture from a charity shop is perceived by her as “a good thing”. This is perhaps an attempt to demonstrate an awareness of pro-environmental behaviours, for example where household items are recycled, or with relation to directing her money towards organisations that will use those funds to better other people’s lives in some way. Conversely, casting a negative outlook on charitable support, she references that use of charity is not an “aspirational” behaviour or choice made, specifically not one made by young adults. By introducing the concept of aspiration, Tracy demonstrates a self-awareness of success and failure in terms of her transition to adulthood. The way in which the participants perceive support from charitable organisations may reveal their attitudes towards asking for help. This may highlight a barrier for young adults in accessing or accepting support, energy-related otherwise, that is targeted at them. Presenting themselves as self-sufficient, could represent a strategy which is utilised to avoid appearing vulnerable or in need.

### 5.3.3 Psychological Mechanisms

In addition to a number of behavioural mechanisms, as outlined in the previous sections, the analysis revealed that participants also employ certain psychological strategies as a mechanism of coping with threats to comfort in the independent home. Notably, such strategies revealed key aspects of how young adults households may manage and makes sense of their relationship with energy and energy-related threats, in particular. Three distinct mechanisms emerged, which included: active efforts to avoid the unexpected, positioning poor or undesirable experiences as impermanent, and evidence of attempts to maintain a positive outlook. These three sub-themes will be discussed in the following sections.

#### *(a) Avoiding the unexpected*

Earlier in the chapter, it was highlighted that certain proactive approaches were adopted by the participants when viewing prospective properties. Negative past experiences with damp and mould, in particular, exposed a failure from housing providers and estate agents to respond to the energy- and fuel poverty-related housing issue in a satisfactory way. For one participant, this had resulted in no perceived alternative but to move out of the property; however for another participant, Rehana, this had prompted her to develop specific search strategies in an effort to avoid such challenges in future homes. In this regard, certain examples, such as damp and mould, were positioned as something to be *expected* in their experiences as tenants (and the experiences of others, i.e. family members).

However, participants also revealed similar proactive efforts to avoid the *unexpected*. Discussed in terms of an energy-related threat to home comfort, this was presented in an



earlier section with regards to the fear of *'the unexpected bill'*. However, in terms of the strategies employed by the participants as a way of coping, the analysis revealed that when justifying preferred payment methods for energy costs, the method of payment used by parents appeared to hold a level of influence over their own decisions. For example, Tracy, who was preparing for an imminent move to a shared house with friends, highlighted how such perceptions and attitudes had created a conflict over whether to pay energy costs in the new home using a PPM, or a credit meter. As she narrates in the excerpt below, energy-related decisions in the home are, to some extent, motivated by a desire to avoid the unexpected, and therefore maintaining a sense of familiarity:

*But then [friends] are very sceptical on the PPM because they have always paid things by bills, but then I suppose what I've said is that the top-up meter is what I've known. As a kid. Like we used to have paper, not even keys, we used to have paper things with like a brown, a brown stripe on them, and my Dad used to send me to shop with a fiver to go and top it up. And he used to send me into this, like we had a shed thing next to our house which you opened and it was like a meter things and its goes click when you've...Growing up, I've always had a payment meter. I suppose, mum and dad, when I think about it, mum and dad have always been on a payment meter. (Tracy)*

Tracy reflects on her past experiences of *'topping up'* the electricity with a sense of fondness and nostalgia. She concludes by emphasising the importance of familiarity in that, for her, using this method of payment is what she has always known. Notably, avoiding the unexpected or the unknown implicates the role of others, predominantly in

this example members of Tracy's trusted network of support, which in this case, concerns her parents.

Interestingly, Tracy was the only participant who evidenced possible experiences of fuel poverty in her childhood, noting that as a child she remembered her parents struggling financially and often going without food or facing difficulties in paying energy costs. However, she also illustrated the influence her parents' energy-related practices had on her decisions as an independent adult. Within the literature, to date, there is limited understanding of how such earlier experiences may impact upon perceptions, attitudes and experiences in young adulthood. For example, where coping strategies are employed, effective or otherwise, is there any evidence to suggest how these strategies develop? To what extent, do experiences of fuel poverty as a child, influence the behaviours and attitudes as a fuel poor young adult?

Lastly, considering the attitudes of the participants with regards to their ability to cope, when compared to the other interviewees, Tracy appeared to be the most concerned regarding the risk of "*being scammed off*" by energy companies. This was a significant motivation for using a PPM, and therefore avoiding unexpectedly high energy bills. Other participants, particularly Janet and Rehana, demonstrated a much stronger and dominant position with regards to how they would best cope with misleading or wrongful practices regarding their energy supply and costing. The analysis did not disregard individual differences, and therefore this finding may merely represent differences from one participant to the next with regards to their individual coping mechanisms or perceived level of resilience when faced with certain adversities. However, this disparity across the participants' narratives may also indicate key differences between certain sub-

demographics of young adult households, regarding their resilience or capacity to cope. Given that previous research has focused predominantly on student young adult households, in order to generate a better understanding of the nature and experiences of fuel poverty among this age group, it may also be important to consider other sub-demographics, such as single young adult households, or lone-parent, young adult households.

*(b) Impermanence as a way of coping*

One of the most notable ways in which psychological mechanisms of coping were utilised was to narrate negative experiences as *temporary*. Specifically, this was evidenced by Jo and Tracy, both graduates with past experiences of living in student accommodation. As Jo reflects in the excerpt below, the 'temporary' or impermanent status of her student home meant that poor housing conditions were easier to live with:

*It wasn't too bad because it was always a temporary thing. And because I knew that we were students and that's sort of what students have to put up with a lot of the time because they sort of have this reputation of not looking after places. People don't give them nice quality places, sometimes, so I just felt like it was temporary so I could deal with it. (Jo)*

Interestingly, the findings here demonstrate similarities to those of Bouzarovski *et al.* (2013) in that Jo's interpretation of the standard of housing students *deserve* or should expect is bound up in wider cultural expectations. Jo relates to "*the image of 'student squalor'*" (Bouzarovski *et al.*, 2013) discussed in previous research, where poor housing conditions are to be endured by certain households (in this case, students) due to a failure

to adequately and responsibly take care of the property. Reflecting on her past identity as a student, Jo doesn't identify as one of those who *deserves* to have been living in such conditions, however, her interpretation of the power certain stereotypes (i.e. students as irresponsible, lazy or dirty) can hold, illustrates the powerlessness she perceives herself to have had during this time. Situating within this understanding of power, Jo revealed that, for her, a mechanism of coping involved reframing her perceptions of the home as impermanent. As she describes in the excerpt below:

*A lot more bare, it didn't feel homely. Didn't feel as homely. I almost wanted to detach myself from it because I didn't like it. I wanted to view it as temporary and I would sort of complain about things whereas, interestingly, another of my housemates was actually like at one point "oh stop saying things, saying horrible things about the house. It's our house, we live in it". So, she sort of didn't like it being put down. I guess for her it probably...it was if she could treat it like home, it made it better. (Jo)*

This excerpt highlights that, for Jo, this strategy was a deliberate effort to remove or *detach* herself from this situation, if only with regards to her interpretations of home. While she narrates this as an attempt to cope with poor, energy inefficient housing, it could also be considered a strategy to reject or *detach* herself from the stigmatised identity of 'the bad student'. This would fit within the existing literature, where across various situations and cultures, stigmatised identities have been defined as those which are "*socially devalued with negative stereotypes and beliefs attached*" (Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013, p1).

Interestingly, Jo also illustrates that within her experiences of shared living as a student, the utilisation of such strategies was not unique to her alone. Where other household members were similarly making attempts to reframe their perceptions of the 'temporary' home, this, at times, resulted in conflict and tensions between those living in the property. However, as Jo highlights, although her housemate demonstrated a markedly different interpretation of the 'temporary' home (i.e. "*treating*" it as a home, and therefore seeing it as more "*homely*"), this was still a deliberate mechanism employed as a way of coping. In discussing the experiences of young adults living in shared arrangements, Hopkins (2012) stated that, often this demographic group will regard the experience as "*an extended transitional period of 'making do', where adulthood is placed 'on hold' until a truly independent adult home can be established*" (p.112-113).

*(c) Maintaining a positive outlook*

Lastly, the third psychological mechanism of coping identified in the analysis related to the temporality of participants' narratives. Notably, almost all of the negative experiences discussed by the participants were situated in the past. When talking about the present, and importantly the future, the participants did so with a seemingly genuine sense of self-confidence and positivity. On some occasions, the participants seemed to make concerted efforts to demonstrate that their current home life was characterised more by positive experiences which were manageable, than by negative experiences. This was noted during the interviews on a number of occasions where, after disclosing a negative (past) experience, participants ensured they concluded such narratives with a statement illustrating that this wasn't a reflection of their current situation: "*oh its better, it's better now, it's much better*" (Janet).

While it is recognised that the participants' reflections may actually be an accurate representation of their current circumstances, this may also reveal specific psychological strategies for managing negative experiences. As noted in the literature review, previous research has identified that, with regards to their own personal situations, young adults overwhelmingly demonstrate a strong sense of optimism (Arnett, 2000). It was suggested that, given the potential failure among this demographic group to recognise conditions indicative of fuel poverty, it may be possible that the strong sense of optimism displayed, plays an influential role in young adults' understanding of the relationship between themselves and energy- or fuel poverty-related challenges.

#### 5.3.4 Summary of Theme Three

The participants' accounts have illustrated a number of mechanisms and strategies employed as a way of coping or responding to energy- or fuel poverty-related challenges. The previous sections of this chapter have introduced a number of such mechanisms and strategies, which emerged from the analysis in two broad ways. Firstly, participants outlined a number of behavioural strategies for coping with or responding to threats, or challenges, with such behaviours including: using the sofa as a site of comfort and warmth, 'going without' or processes of compromise and renegotiation of essential needs, as well as accessing charitable support.

Secondly, the analysis also revealed that a number of psychological strategies were utilised to manage or reframe the participants' perceptions and interpretations of their current and past experiences. In particular, the findings highlighted that, efforts to avoid the unexpected, understanding poor or undesirable experiences as impermanent, and conscious efforts to maintain a positive outlook, all helped to alleviate the impacts of

various threats to home comfort. Notably, it is recognised that many of the mechanisms and strategies presented here have been presented in earlier research; where such similarities have been noted, these have been discussed in relation to the appropriate studies. Overall, what can be understood from the findings of this research, as with previous findings, is that mechanisms of coping, or responding to energy- or fuel poverty-related threats, vary widely between individuals and household formations.

## 5.4 Conclusion

Chapter Five has turned the analytical focus towards the participants understanding of their relationship with domestic energy in the home, and consequently how they construct and make sense of their experiences of energy- and fuel poverty-related threats to comfort. The analysis revealed that narratives concerning domestic energy were mostly conveyed by the participants in two ways, which formed the second and third master themes: *'threats to comfort'* and *'energy and coping'*. Firstly, energy-related aspects of lived experience were constructed by the participants in terms of threats; specifically, threats to comfort in the independent home. The second part of Chapter Five has highlighted a range of behavioral and psychological mechanisms of coping employed by the young adults within this context, relating such strategies, where relevant, to the emergent threats discussed in the first part of this chapter. The next chapter, Chapter Six, will conclude the thesis.

## Chapter Six: Conclusion

### 6.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research was to expand upon and enhance the current understanding of the nature and experiences of fuel poverty among a demographic group that have received very little attention across the literature to date. Government figures have reported that '*young adult households*' – those where the oldest member is younger than 25 – are disproportionately more likely to be in fuel poverty, compared to any other age group (DECC, 2015a). Furthermore, those aged 18-25 face various additional challenges and vulnerabilities including: lower incomes (from employment or state benefits), an increased likelihood to be living in the poorest quality (energy inefficient) housing, and significantly higher levels of personal debt.

The literature review highlighted that there has been only one study to date which has focused exclusively on fuel poverty among this demographic group (Bouzarovski *et al.*, 2013). Given the significant dearth of research in this area, Bouzarovski *et al.*'s (2013) study played a significant role in the design of the present research. Findings from the previous research illustrated that many young adults may not conceive of themselves as fuel poor, despite indicating they were living in conditions indicative of fuel poverty (i.e. cold indoor temperatures, presence of damp and mould, etc.). As a result, it was concluded that: "*issues of recognition are central to understanding and addressing this group's susceptibility to domestic energy deprivation*" (Bouzarovski *et al.*, 2013, p.1). Therefore, in an attempt to understand the lived experience within which this failure to '*recognise*' fuel poverty may occur, the present research adopted a broader approach in



order to generate a better understanding of the ways in which young adults construct and make sense of their relationship with energy in the independent home.

In addition, this research also aimed to explore how this demographic group may perceive themselves to be burdened by energy-related challenges and vulnerabilities, which involved drawing on the concept of energy vulnerability. Under the definition proposed by Middlemiss and Gillard (2015), energy vulnerability explores the experiences of fuel poverty not as a fixed state – for example, where a household either *is* or *isn't* fuel poor – but instead considers how different households may have varying degrees of vulnerability to fuel poverty in terms of their “*exposure, sensitivity and adaptive capacity*” (ibid, p.147).

In order to generate a greater understanding of the perceptions, attitudes and experiences of fuel poverty, or energy vulnerability, among young adult households, this research set out to address two key objectives:

1. By exploring the lived experience of young adults, focusing on the ways in which they construct and make sense of their experiences of living independently and managing the independent home, what can we learn about their relationship with domestic energy (i.e. gas and electricity)?
2. Drawing on the concept of energy vulnerability, which defines fuel poverty as a dynamic issue which affects different households in different ways, what can we learn about the way in which young adults construct and make sense of fuel poverty-related issues and challenges in the independent home?

Adopting a qualitative methodology, six in-depth interviews with young adults were conducted. The participants, Tracy, Janet, Adam, Jo, Maggie, and Rehana, were recruited through a local advice organisation - Salford Citizens Advice – which is also where the researcher is based as an employee. All six participants had recent or present experiences of managing a home independently, and therefore, also had experiences of managing the way in which energy is supplied, used, and paid for in the home.

This chapter, the final chapter, will begin by presenting a summary of the main findings from the analysis. The next section, *Section 6.3*, will consider limitations of this research, including suggestions for future work. Having utilised a qualitative methodology, the following section, *Section 6.4*, will address the process of reflexivity. Lastly, the final section of this chapter will conclude the thesis outlining some final thoughts.

## 6.2 Summary of Main Findings

Overall, the findings from this research support those of Bouzarovski *et al.* (2013) in that, despite alluding to household conditions indicative of fuel poverty, none of the participants identified as being fuel poor. Some of the energy related challenges which emerged from the interviews included: self-disconnection of energy supply, energy debts, ill-health, unrelenting challenges with damp and mouldy properties, and some limited references to a lack of thermal comfort in the home.

Given the findings from previous research, to some extent it was expected that participants may not recognise conditions indicative of fuel poverty. Considering this, the research intentionally looked more broadly at the lived experience of young adult households in terms of their experiences of managing the independent home. It was

highlighted in the literature review that much of the research focused on young people and housing has been concerned with the transition from the parental home to the independent home; however, as noted by Hopkins (2010): *“a very important aspect of young people’s lives is often the experience of ‘making home’ and the practices and processes associated with this”* (p.111). Therefore, a critical part of the analysis was to generate a better understanding of how individuals establish and sustain a sense of comfort, including experiences of managing thermal comfort. This was addressed in Chapter Four, which presented the first master theme: ‘establishing the independent home’.

In the participants’ narratives of ‘making home’, three distinctive characteristics were identified, which included the ability to personalise the living space, the capacity to provide and sustain a safe environment, and the role and responsibility regarding cleanliness and domesticity in the home. Brought together, these characteristics illustrated that essentially the overall goal of ‘making home’ is closely linked to understandings and experiences of comfort. The participants highlighted that often they perceived themselves to have very limited capacity to act in terms of desired or necessary changes required of the home. This situation was maintained largely by problematic relationships with landlords and housing providers, but was also challenged by limited financial resources.

Although limited, references to energy did sometimes emerge from narratives of ‘making home’. The most dominant way in which this occurred was with regards to young adult householders’ ability to sustain adequate levels of cleanliness in the home. Simply, living

in a cold home represented a significant barrier to the ability to efficaciously carry out domestic tasks.

The analysis revealed that participants' narratives concerning domestic energy in the independent home were constructed broadly in two ways. The first concerned a number of energy related threats to comfort, which included: the widespread presence of 'damp and mould', challenging 'laundry practices', fear of 'the unexpected bill', and 'disconnection'. Energy-related threats, as presented by the participants, illustrated that the relationship with energy in the home is complex and multifaceted.

Predominantly, the participants' interpretations of the way in which such aspects threatened their comfort were rooted in their awareness of power and their own capacity to act. This extensively implicates the role of others, which primarily includes landlords and housing providers (as noted earlier), energy suppliers, and friends and family. The findings revealed that the role of others can be thought of either in terms of exacerbating, or mitigating such threats. For example, with regards to the widespread presence of damp and mould in the participants' past and present properties, landlords were portrayed negatively, due to their perceived neglect of the issue. Conversely, friends and family members were portrayed positively, in that they formed key contact within the young adults' trusted networks of support.

The third master theme to emerge from the analysis revealed a number of ways in which the participants coped with threats to home comfort. The mechanisms by which participants coped with threats to comfort varied across the sample. As well as a number of identified behavioural strategies, the participants disclosed psychological or attitudinal

strategies which, to some extent, shifted their perspectives of certain challenges in a way that allowed for increased levels of resilience. A key example of this highlighted that for poorer or undesirable living conditions, participants would often frame such circumstances as '*only temporary*'. In this way, experiences that weren't to be endured indefinitely, were somehow easier to cope with. This was mostly narrated by those participants who had lived in student accommodation, which again relates back to the findings of Bouzarovski *et al.* (2013).

Coping with cold indoor temperatures typically involved using blankets or gathering with other household members on the sofa, which was portrayed as a site of comfort and warmth. Interestingly, as noted in Chapter Five, interpretations of such behaviours which had originally been established as a way of coping, were now perceived to be "*weird*" in that they were utilised even during times when not cold. Shifting perceptions of certain behaviours, from coping mechanisms to habits, highlights the importance of continued research efforts to better understand the subjective experiences of fuel poverty- and energy-related challenges and vulnerabilities.

Lastly, while not forming a distinct theme in its own right, a major finding from this research concerns the participants' interpretations of vulnerability, and specifically, perceptions of their own vulnerability. There were many occasions throughout the interviews where the participants would use their language in a way that managed or mediated references made regarding a sense of helplessness. In particular, this was most noticeable by their efforts to convey that negative experiences were something once endured in the past, but no longer a challenge they felt burdened by. However, despite such discursive strategies, the household characteristics or financial circumstances of

most of the participants appeared to be unchanged from the *past* experiences they were reflecting on.

As highlighted, young adulthood is a time in life typically consumed by periods of profound change. In establishing a sense of 'adulthood', individualistic qualities of character such as "*accepting responsibility for one's self*", "*making independent decisions*", and "*becoming financially independent*" are among those considered by young adults to be most important (Arnett, 2000). Therefore, the experiences of challenges which threaten these qualities of character, as evidenced within this research, might also be considered as threats to one's identity as an adult. In this regard, rejecting or managing a sense of vulnerability could be understood as an attempt to preserve one's sense of independence, and consequently their successful transition to '*adulthood*'. In the context of fuel poverty, energy vulnerability, and even poverty or disadvantage more broadly, it may be critically important to further consider such underlying processes. In the context of fuel poverty among young adult households specifically, this looks beyond issues of recognition as a lack of awareness or as a result of wider cultural expectations regarding housing standards (Bouzarovski *et al.*, 2013), and instead considers the issue as an unwillingness to acknowledge such conditions. Therefore, in this regard, approaches which reframe the current discourse away from one centred on '*vulnerability*' may be more appropriate in order to generate a greater understanding of the experiences among this demographic group.

### 6.3 Limitations and Future Research

With such a limited body of existing research that has focused on the nature and experiences of fuel poverty among this demographic group, it was expected that a number of avenues for further research would be identified. Indeed, any one of the master themes considered in isolation would open up the potential to generate an even greater understanding of the issue as experienced by young adult households.

Considering, also, the three distinct sections of the literature review - which focused first on the context of fuel poverty, then introduced the concept of energy vulnerability, and lastly considered young adulthood and the independent home – existing research in each area of work has identified a need for further study. With regards to fuel poverty among young adult households, as highlighted on a number of occasions, there is certainly a wide scope to expand upon what is already known. In addition, the concept of '*energy vulnerability*' is recognised as a relatively new term within the field, which has consequently received little attention to date. Similarly, in the body of research which has focused on young adults and housing, the *practices* and *processes* involved in 'making home' have been somewhat neglected (Hopkins, 2012). In the present research it was identified that, if brought together, these three areas of research could work to complement each other; therefore, offering a key opportunity to explore the lived experience of young adults as independent household members in regards to the their understanding of and relationship with domestic energy.

One of the most significant limitations of this study relates to the time of year in which data collection took place. Interviews were conducted during May and June, which are recognised as typically warmer months, and fall at the end of a cold winter period. This

could mean that, at the time of being interviewed, a householder's concerns regarding colder indoor temperatures are not as significant as they may during other (colder) months throughout the year. Relating this to the findings of the research forms a critical consideration as, despite situating comfort as a priority, the ability to provide and sustain adequate thermal comfort (i.e. warmth), was seldom noted. The reason for undertaking data collection at this time is directly linked to the overall time period in which the research degree (for which this thesis fulfils) was completed. As outlined in Table 3.1 (see page 54), research activity began in December 2014. Ethical approval to conduct the interviews was not obtained until April 2015, therefore already out of the colder, winter months prior to beginning of participant recruitment. It is important to note, however, that as outlined in the literature review, fuel poverty does not only concern thermal comfort or the ability to achieve adequate warmth, but also the impacts of domestic energy deprivation with regard to other energy services such as lighting, cooking, cleaning and entertainment. It is hoped that the findings from this research illustrate that the challenges and vulnerabilities faced by young adults in terms of their energy- and fuel-related experiences extend far beyond a consideration only of thermal comfort.

Considering a further limitation of this research, all participants were recruited from a local advice organisation. This means that the analysis has only considered the experiences of young adults who actively sought out help or advice (regarding energy related issues, or otherwise), and then going beyond this by taking additional steps to be self-selecting participants in this research. It is recognised that this is likely to have had a significant impact upon the research findings making it difficult to fully consider how typical such experiences may be for other young adults. For example, contrary to the



findings of Bouzarovski *et al.* (2013), seeking help could indicate quite clear levels of recognition among the participants that there was a need for support and a change in their current circumstances, whether energy-related or otherwise. Young adult populations are recognised as a *hard-to-reach* group (Abrams, 2010), and therefore one opportunity for further research could be to consider alternative sampling and recruitment strategies, in order to further develop the understanding of fuel poverty among some of the most *vulnerable* or *hard-to-reach* young adult households.

Furthermore, three of the six participants included in the sample had migrated to the UK; two of whom had sought asylum and had subsequently been granted refugee status. While the experiences of each participant varied considerably, regardless of their nationality or whether their housing pathways had included migrating from one country to another, it was clear from the interviews that without access to family support nearby, life was considerably harder. This was particularly the case for Adam, a refugee from Sudan, who lived alone in a flat with very few possessions or household items. Awaiting decisions from applications made to charities for help with such items, Adam recognised that as a result his energy needs and energy costs were set to increase. Despite these being recognised as essential household items, the introduction of them to his home created an energy-related concern for this reason. This example highlights just one possibility to explore certain sub-demographics of young adult households. Others might include: those who have experienced periods of homelessness, lone-parent young adult households, young adults moving from care, non-student populations living in predominantly student areas, or those with illnesses or disabilities. Furthermore, energy-related experiences as a child or adolescent growing up in a different country is likely to

have had a significant impact upon the participants' experiences of energy as independent adults in England.

Interestingly, narratives concerning shared living arrangements, or HMOs, revealed key findings with regards to the way in which energy is used, as well as highlighting barriers in terms of energy-related awareness and understanding. Critically, this centred on experiences of living in shared housing where tenancy agreements operate under the 'all bills included' contractual terms. As noted, such tenancies require the householder to make a single payment which typically covers rent and the main utility bills; individuals living under such tenancy agreements, therefore, aren't usually aware of their energy costs. As this research has highlighted, this results in a lack of awareness for some young people, particularly those who have spent the first few years out of the parental home living under such typical student arrangements. Future work could aim to address this lost opportunity to *learn* about energy in the home, where individuals have limited engagement with energy costs and billing practices. This may be especially critical in a time where the number of non-student young adults living in shared housing is increasing.

Lastly, although there have been considerable efforts within the literature to explore various coping mechanisms employed by fuel poor or energy vulnerable households, still very little is known regarding how such strategies develop. In particular, there may be a key opportunity for future work to explore how certain strategies emerge, and if previous experiences or exposure to such mechanisms, for example as a child living in a fuel poor household, play a role.

## 6.4 Reflexivity

Qualitative methods adopt the position that research is always and necessarily subjective (Mason, 2002). As noted in Chapter Three, IPA research, in particular, recognises that at the centre of the analytic process is the role of the researcher who is *“trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them”* (Smith et al., 2009, p.3). This manifestly implicates the role of the researcher, their own world views, assumptions and biases, as well the nature of the interviewer-interviewee interaction. Sullivan, Gibson and Riley (2010) posit that the *“best way to deal with subjectivity is to give it an overt role in the research process”* (p.159). As such, a reflexive standpoint was maintained throughout the completion of this research. It is within this section that some of the key considerations, regarding reflexivity, will be drawn upon.

Processes of reflexivity are particularly critical at moments where key research decisions are made such as choosing the area or phenomena to study, the development of research questions and design, through to the collection, analysis and interpretation of data, as well as throughout the production of the final written account. Sullivan, Gibson and Riley (2012) note that: *“keeping a diary is particularly important for IPA research to help the researcher to maintain a reflective diary to record impressions, hunches, and other notes on the analytic process”* (p.132). Given that this research was completed over an eleven month period, the keeping of a research diary proved to be especially beneficial. For example, as noted in Chapter Three, the research diary was a crucial resource during data collection and analysis. Supplementary field notes taken briefly during and in greater detail after each interview were returned to on countless occasions. Combining these

reflective notes with the audio recordings have worked to ensure that the analysis has remained grounded within the participants' accounts.

Considering another key research decision, it was outlined in the introduction that this research was, in part, motivated by experiences as an employee at Salford Citizens Advice. As noted, younger service users appeared to present certain issues in different ways, compared to those adults who were older, and this sparked a keen interest in the underlying processes which may be involved. In addition, a large proportion of young adults accessing the service present with issues relating to their experiences as tenants, largely but not exclusively, within the private rented sector.

As someone with substantial experience as a tenant living in privately rented properties, many of the challenges discussed by the participants were issues that could be related to on a personal level. Engaging in reflexivity allowed such personal experiences to be positioned in a way that could enhance and enrich interpretations inferred from the participants' narratives. In this way, there were occasions where the analysis was able to adopt a genuine sense of understanding and relatability. However, demonstrating an overt awareness of the similarities in the researcher's personal experiences and those of the participants, also worked to maintain an appropriate level of distance, sustaining the professional integrity as a researcher. Due to the iterative nature of qualitative research, there were many opportunities to reflect in detail on the interpretations made, to ensure, as noted, that they were firmly grounded within the participants' experiences.

In addition, another role which demanded the attention of reflexive processes was that as an employee with the organisation, Salford Citizens Advice. As an *'insider'*, the

researcher is “*unique position to study a particular issue in depth and with special knowledge about that issue. Not only do you have your own insider knowledge, but you have easy access to people and information that can further enhance that knowledge*” (Costley, 2010, p.3). With particular regards to participant recruitment, this ‘*insider*’ position boasted obvious benefits, in that access to participants was relatively unproblematic, especially due to the close relationship held with the organisation. However, while offering obvious benefits to the research, it was critical for the researcher to reflect upon and afford efforts in managing the two separate professional identities (e.g. as a researcher and as an employed advisor). This was especially important during the interviews, which were completed in the same rooms the researcher would carry out their role as an employee. In attempts to distinguish between the two roles a number of strategies were used. For example, one strategy involved allowing sufficient time between Citizens Advice working days, and those when interviews were completed. In addition, interviews were only completed during hours when the bureau was not open to the public. This allowed for data to be collected in a suitably quiet and private space, but also helped to envision the space as somewhere separate to the role as an employee.

It has been noted that, for the researcher themselves, the experience of conducting IPA research has the potential to be “*collaborative, personal, intuitive, difficult, creative, intense, and conceptually-demanding*” (Smith *et al.*, 2009, p.80). Now, in the final stages of completing the research, such a description seems very appropriate. Exploring the nature of interpretation is complicated yet enlightening. As a novice IPA researcher, and to some extent, stepping into a new research area and discipline, there is certainly a willingness to accept that at many times, particularly during the analysis, the process felt

*difficult, intense, and conceptually-demanding* (Smith *et al.*, 2009, p.80). Returning to the literature often helped to alleviate such concerns. For example, a major analytic concern centred on the commitment to ensure that findings remained grounded in the experiences of the participants. Use of a research diary and returning to the audio recordings were helpful in achieving this. However, considered even more helpful were a number of articles which emphasised the importance of *creativity* and *intuition*, as also noted above. In particular, Evans (2013) reminded readers that “*any conclusions are therefore tentative because of infinite number of interpretations possible*” (p.365); emphasising that it is always necessary to adopt a somewhat mindful view of narrated interpretations as they are presented within qualitative analysis.

## 6.5 Final Thoughts

As we enter another winter, the lives of fuel poor households, including those where the oldest member is younger than 25, are set to become increasingly more challenging. The difficult decisions faced by those in fuel poverty will likely mean that in order to stay warm during colder months there may be many missed meals, increased illness, poor mental wellbeing, rising debts, worsening relationships, as well as many other consequences. Fuel poverty is not isolated to the experiences of any one particular demographic group or household formation, however, across the existing evidence base of research and policy publications, the experiences of young adult households continue to remain largely absent.

This research has highlighted that, for those young adults interviewed, the transition to a state of independence is consumed by complex and all-consuming decisions and learning processes related to managing money, the home, one’s career or continued education, as

well as a key period in which a householder's relationship with energy in the home develops. Efforts to better understand the *practices* and *processes* involved in the lives of young adults as independent household members will consequently improve the current understanding of how this demographic group cope with and respond to many challenges, including those related to energy in the home. Essentially, all efforts in tackling the issue of fuel poverty should ensure that the voices and experiences of all those who are 'vulnerable' or 'at risk' are heard, including those of young adult households.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Ethical Approval

University of  
**Salford**  
MANCHESTER

Research, Innovation and Academic  
Engagement Ethical Approval Panel

College of Health & Social Care  
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27 April 2015

Dear Danielle,

**RE: ETHICS APPLICATION HSCR 15-25 – “A Qualitative Analysis of the Experiences of Fuel Poverty among Young Adults”**

Based on the information you provided, I am pleased to inform you that application HSCR15-25 has been approved.

If there are any changes to the project and/ or its methodology, please inform the Panel as soon as possible by contacting [HSresearch@salford.ac.uk](mailto:HSresearch@salford.ac.uk)

Yours sincerely,



Sue McAndrew  
Chair of the Research Ethics Panel

## Appendix 2: Organisational Agreement from Salford Citizens Advice



Tom Togher &lt;tom.togher@salfordcab.org.uk&gt;

Thu 19/02/2015 15:19

Inbox

Mark as unread

To: Butler, Danielle Elizabeth (UG);

Hi Danielle,

Yes, I'm still very happy for you to look to recruit clients from Salford Cabx to help with your research. I am happy to confirm that you have discussed your proposals with me, and I see no 'ethics' concerns. As I said, all clients will need to be self selecting, and will need to have given an informed consent. Additionally we will be happy to provide you with any help or advice that you might need. And of course, good luck!

As ever,  
with best wishes,  
Tom,

Tom Togher  
Chief Officer  
Salford Citizens Advice Bureaux  
40 Church Street,  
Eccles.  
M30 0DF  
Tel: 0161 707 4222  
Email: [tom.togher@salfordcab.org.uk](mailto:tom.togher@salfordcab.org.uk)

Salford Citizens Advice Bureaux has a complaints handling procedure. Please email [sm@district.cabnet.org.uk](mailto:sm@district.cabnet.org.uk) to request a copy of the complaints leaflet to be either posted or emailed to you.

A part of Citizens Advice Bureaux (Salford), a company Limited by Guarantee.  
Registered number 226364 England  
Registered office: 40-44 Church Street, Eccles, Manchester M30 0DF  
Registered Charity Number 701559.  
Authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority  
FRN: 617722- Firm Name: Salford Citizens Advice Bureaux

## Appendix 3: Participants Consent Form

**Research Participant Consent Form – Interview****Title of Project:**

A Qualitative Analysis of the Experiences of Fuel Poverty among Young Adults

**Ethics Ref No:** HSCR15/25**Name of Researcher:** Danielle Elizabeth Butler

- |   |     |    |
|---|-----|----|
| ➤ I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study (08/04/2015 v0.3) and what my contribution will be. | Yes | No |
| ➤ I have been given the opportunity to ask questions (face to face, via telephone and e-mail)   | Yes | No |
| ➤ I agree to take part in the interview   | Yes | No |
| ➤ I agree to the interview being tape recorded  | Yes | No |
| ➤ I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the research at any time <b>without giving any reason</b>  | Yes | No |
| ➤ I understand how the researcher will use my responses, who will see them and how the data will be stored.                               | Yes | No |
| ➤ <b>I agree to take part in the above study</b>  | Yes | No |

Name of participant .....

Signature .....

Date .....

Name of researcher taking consent Danielle Elizabeth Butler

Researcher's email address d.e.butler@edu.salford.ac.uk

## Appendix 4: Interview Guide

### 1. Can you tell me about life in Salford?

*What is it like to live here?*

*Is it different for young adults compared to other age groups? If so, why is this?*

*Why do people move to Salford?*

*Why do people move away from Salford?*

*Do you think Salford has changed? If so, how?*

### 2. What makes a house a home?

*What is the housing like in your local area?*

*What types of housing do young people in Salford typically live in? Why is this?*

*What changes should there be to housing in your local area? Why is this important?*

*Tell me about what makes a home comfortable? To what extent is this the same or different for other households?*

### 3. Thinking about managing the costs of your home, which costs are essential?

*Why are these household costs essential over others?*

*What worries you most about managing your own home?*

*If you can't afford a necessity what do you do?*

*If you had more money each week what would you spend this on?*

*What difference would this make to your life?*

*What are the most difficult decisions you have to make about the cost of your home (e.g. heat or eat)?*

### 4. What does affordable warmth mean to you?

*What are the biggest problems related to not having enough fuel (electricity/gas)?*

*What influences your decisions about how to pay for your fuel?*

*What are the major problems with managing fuel costs/use at home?*

*What strategies do households use to make fuel bills cheaper?*

*Do people who live in cold homes behave differently? If so, in what ways? Why is this?*

### 5. What is it like living independently?

*What are the benefits of living independently?*

*What are the greatest challenges to young people living on their own?*

*What were your reasons for moving into your own home?*

*What, if any, support have you received since moving into your own home?*

*Where do young adults turn to in times of crisis?*

*What advice would you give to the next generation of young adults moving out of the family home?*





## Appendix 6: Participant Information Sheet

**University of Salford**  
MANCHESTER

**A Qualitative Analysis of the Experiences of Fuel Poverty among Young Adults**

**Researcher:** Danielle Butler E: [d.e.butler@edu.salford.ac.uk](mailto:d.e.butler@edu.salford.ac.uk)  
**Supervisor:** Dr Graeme Sherriff E: [g.sherriff@salford.ac.uk](mailto:g.sherriff@salford.ac.uk)

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**Participant Information Sheet – One-to-one interview**

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 carried out 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.

This research project aims to understand the perceptions and experiences of fuel use and fuel poverty among young adults living in Salford. You have been asked to take part in an interview with a researcher from the University of Salford.

**Why is this research being carried out?**

The purpose of the research project is to better understand the experiences and challenges faced by individuals when managing the costs of domestic energy (e.g. gas and electricity) in the home. This project is specifically interested in the experiences of young adults living in Salford.

My name is Danielle Butler and I'm completing this research project as part of a research degree. My work is being supervised by Dr Graeme Sherriff from the University of Salford. The contact details for Graeme and I can be found at the top of the page.

**Why have I been invited?**

You have been asked to participate because you are an adult, aged 18-24, who currently lives in Salford and who is responsible for paying the fuel bills in your home. To date, there has been limited research that explores the perceptions and experiences of fuel use and fuel poverty among young adults who manage the costs of fuel in their own homes. This research project aims to contribute to this gap.

You have been asked to take part in an interview because you have identified that you currently receive a means-tested benefit (e.g. jobseekers allowance or employment and support allowance).

**Do I have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide. We will describe the study and go through the information sheet, which we will give to you. We will then ask you to sign a consent form to show you agreed to take part. You are free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason.

**What will happen to me if I take part?**

If you want to participate in this research project, I would like to invite you to take part in an interview. You will only be asked meet/talk with me once for the purpose of this project.

Should you wish to speak with me about the research project after the interview has finished, this can be done using the contact details at the top of the page. Anything we discuss after the interview will not be included in the final report without your permission.

The interview will be one-to-one with me and will last no longer than 45 minutes.

In the interview I am interested in exploring your experience of fuel use at home and any issues associated with meeting the costs of gas and electricity. In particular, I am interested in things like:

- What are the important factors that make a home comfortable?
- Which household costs are essential and how do we budget for these costs?
- What strategies are used when household costs such as gas or electricity can't be met?
- What are the impacts of not having enough gas or electricity to fuel your home?
- What kind of support is available for those who are unable to heat their home to an adequate level?

I will ask for your permission to tape the interview to ensure that the information you give me is accurately recorded. All personal information will be held in accordance with data protection. Any signed documents will be kept in a locked filing cabinet at the University

of Salford and all audio recordings will be kept on an encrypted memory drive. All participant information will be kept confidential and the final report will be written in a manner to ensure anonymity is kept.

**Expenses and payments?**

There will be no payment or reimbursement of expenses for taking part in this research project.

**What will I have to do?**

During the interview I will be asking questions, as mentioned above, that focus on your experiences of managing the cost of gas and electricity in your home. There are no right or wrong answers to the questions. If you do not want to answer a question you do not have to. If you feel uncomfortable with any question or part of the discussion you can ask me to move on, or stop the interview. If at any point you want to withdraw from the research project you can do so without giving a reason.

**Where will you talk to me?**

The interview will take place somewhere that is convenient to you. It will be somewhere quiet and comfortable, and somewhere where we won't be interrupted. This could be at your local Citizen's Advice Bureau or at the University. It is possible to complete the interview over the phone. If you would prefer this, please ask me and I will contact you to make the necessary arrangements.

**What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part??**

There should be little or no risk to you in taking part in this research project.

However, I recognise that the subject area being discussed may cause feelings of distress. If you feel as though your participation is causing you to feel distressed at any point you can ask me to stop the interview without giving a reason. If you want to take a break or arrange to contact me again at a later date this will be accommodated where possible. If you want to contact me after the research you can do so using the contact details at the top of the page.

I will also provide details of two local specialist services who can offer targeted information and advice about fuel use, fuel poverty and other related issues. The two local services are: Salford Citizens Advice Bureau and the Warm Salford scheme. Both service provide advice and information on a strictly confidential basis and can refer you to other local specialist services if needed

**What are the benefits of taking part?**

We cannot promise you that you will benefit from taking part in this study. However, it is anticipated that the information you give may help to better understand the attitudes towards and experiences of fuel poverty among young adults living in Salford. This may help to identify appropriate strategies and better targeted support to help individuals who faces challenges with managing the cost of fuel in their home.

**What if there is a problem?**

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you should ask to speak to the researchers who will do their best to answer your questions. Contact details can be found at the top and bottom of this information sheet.

If you remain unhappy and wish to complain formally you can do so by contacting Anish Kurien ([a.kurien@salford.ac.uk](mailto:a.kurien@salford.ac.uk)) at the University of Salford.

**Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?**

All of the information collected from you during this research will be kept secure and any identifying material such as names and addresses will be removed in order to ensure anonymity. The information you give will be treated in the strictest confidence and will not be shared with those involved in any services you receive. However, you should be aware that the researchers would have to pass on information to other professionals that raised serious concerns about risk to yourself or others, including serious child protection concerns.

**Who will know about my involvement in the study?**

As few people as possible will know about your participation in the research. The people that will know about your participation will be the members of the research team from the University of Salford.

**What will happen if I don't carry on with the study?**

If you withdraw from the study all the information and data collected from you will be destroyed and your name removed from all the study files.

**What will happen to the results of the research study?**

After the research is completed the results will be written up in a final report. As outlined, this report will be written in a manner that ensures all participants remain anonymous. If you would like an electronic copy of the research report please contact the researcher on the details provided at the top and bottom of the information sheet. Results of the research may be submitted for publication. A copy of the final report will also be made available on the Eaga Charitable Trust website (<http://www.eagacharitabletrust.org/>).

**Who is organising or sponsoring the research?**

This research project is being organised by me with the careful supervision of Dr Graeme Sherriff, as part of a research degree at the University of Salford. Financial support for the completion of this research project has been received by the Eaga Charitable Trust.

Finally, if you agree, thank you for taking part in this research. If you choose not to participate thank you for reading this information.

**Further information:** If you wish to discuss this further before making a decision you may speak to Danielle Butler at [d.e.butler@edu.salford.ac.uk](mailto:d.e.butler@edu.salford.ac.uk) or Dr Graeme Sherriff at [g.sherriff@salford.ac.uk](mailto:g.sherriff@salford.ac.uk).

## Appendix 7: Biographical participant profiles

**Tracey** is a 23 year-old female. Currently living in a privately rented flat with her partner (not interviewed for this project) they have both experienced periods of unemployment and consequently been claimants of jobseekers allowance, housing benefit and council tax reduction. They have lived in the current property for over two years. Both their gas and electricity is supplied by Economy Energy and paid for using pre-payment meters.

**Janet** is a 23 year-old female, living in a two bedroom housing association property. A lone parent, she lives with her two young children and has spent over two years at her current address. Janet claims benefits including tax credits, housing benefit and council tax reduction. British Gas supply both her electricity and gas and she pays for both using pre-payment meters.

**Adam** is a 21 year-old male. A refugee, he is currently living alone in a one bedroom local authority property and has been at the address for a few months. He is currently in receipt of jobseekers allowance, housing benefit and council tax reduction but has recently started working a part-time hours. He has no gas supply at the property, and his electricity is supplied by E-On. He pays for this using a pre-payment meter.

**Jo** is a 24 year old female. She has recently moved out of privately rented accommodation and is temporarily living with her parents. She was at her previous property for over two years, where she lived with her partner (not interviewed for this research project). Both graduates, they have experienced periods of unemployment since finishing university and had poor experiences with trying to claim jobseekers allowance. Both the gas and electricity was supplied by Ebico (SSE) and they opted to pay for their fuel quarterly.

**Maggie** is a 21 year-old female, living in a housing association studio flat with her husband. A refugee, she has lived independently for the last three years. She has experienced periods of homelessness and has been at her current property for a few months. She claims jobseekers allowance, housing benefit and council tax reduction. Both her gas and electricity are supplied by E-On and paid for using pre-payment meters.

**Rehana** is a 23 year old female. She has recently moved out of a privately rented three bedroom property and is temporarily living with her partner's parents. She has two young children. Both Rehana and her partner have past experiences of unemployment, claiming jobseekers allowance, tax credits, housing benefit and council tax reduction. In her last property, her electricity and gas were provided by Utility; both bills were paid for using pre-payment meters.