



SHUSU
Sustainable Housing &
Urban Studies Unit



Changes4Warmth: Lessons Learned & Directions Forward

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Changes4Warmth





Beat the Cold is an independent specialist charity working across Staffordshire, Stoke-on-Trent and neighbouring areas to combat fuel poverty and reduce the incidence of cold-related ill health. For over 20 years Beat the Cold has provided high-quality, tailored advice to nearly 40,000 local people to help them take control of their energy use at home, find best tariffs, avoid fuel debts, access energy efficiency measures, and reduce the risk of fuel poverty. The charity also contributes to local and national fuel poverty strategies including the 2015 NICE Guidance.

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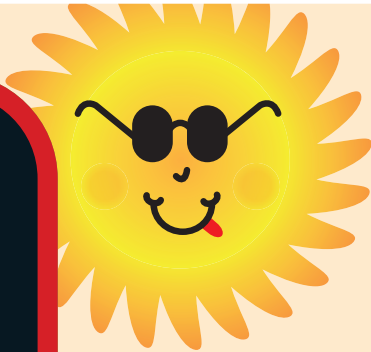


Cover image: Characters Flicker and Flare designed by Changes4Warmth volunteers to promote the project.



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Changes 4 Warmth

Above 21°C - Too Hot

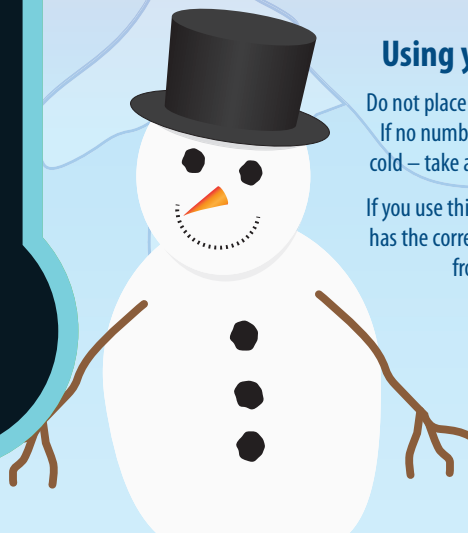
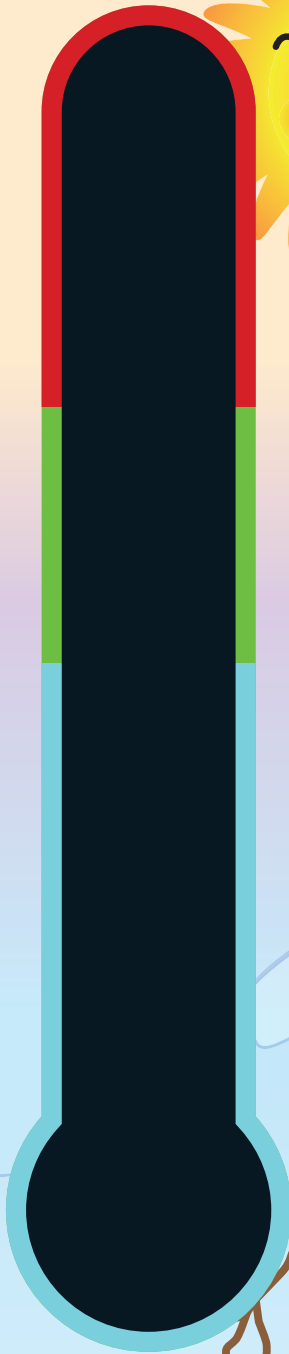
Turn down your heating to save money

18°C-21°C - Just Right

Ideal for health and comfort

Below 16°C - Too Cold

Your health could be at risk



Using your card thermometer

Do not place it close to heating or in direct sunlight.
If no number glows, the room is very hot or very cold – take action to adjust the room temperature.

If you use this card in a baby's room, check the baby has the correct amount of bedding and take advice from your health professional.



LOTTERY FUNDED

1. Introduction



1.1 Overview

Beat the Cold is currently delivering Changes4Warmth, a Big Lottery funded project in partnership with Changes Health and Wellbeing. It aims to address the fuel poverty of people with mental health needs by offering assistance to mental health service users.

Beat the Cold have commissioned this lessons learned study to assess the impact of Changes4Warmth, with a view to identifying good practice that can be built upon in future work and opportunities to learn from and develop all aspects of the project. The research comprised a set of interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders in the project and the service users who have benefitted from its delivery.

The report begins by outlining the approach taken to the fieldwork and analysis before presenting a thematic analysis of the findings. It then offers a set of conclusions and recommendations that help to summarise the findings of the project and begin to look to future work in this important area.

1.2 What is Changes4Warmth

Changes4Warmth is a partnership between Beat the Cold and local mental health charity, Changes Health and Wellbeing. Beat the Cold, the lead organisation, is a fuel poverty charity working across Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire and surrounding areas, which aims to reduce the incidence of cold-related illness and fuel poverty. It provides information, advice and support to those at risk from cold homes. Amongst the most vulnerable are people with mental health needs.

This three-year project is funded by the Big Lottery Fund and aims to reduce fuel poverty amongst people with mental health issues. The project is delivered through Beat the Cold energy advisors and volunteer energy champions. A key element of Changes4Warmth is home visits carried out by qualified energy advisors.

The intended outcomes of Changes4Warmth include improved confidence to manage fuel costs and consumption, a reduction in fuel costs and improved energy efficiency, improved health and wellbeing and, for project volunteers, improved confidence and skills to take up new training, educational and employment opportunities.

1.3 Mental Health and Cold Homes

This work builds upon previous research with Beat the Cold (Sherriff 2016), in which mental health service users were trained to interview each other on their experiences of cold homes. The research reaffirmed the connection between mental health and fuel poverty and emphasised that the relationship is complex. It is not simply that being cold worsens mental health, it is also the case that the experience of managing home finances and dealing with utility companies can add to stress and anxiety, and these conditions in turn limit capacity to understand and engage with energy.

There is an urgent need, and opportunity, to better understand how to reduce the physiological and mental health impacts of living in cold homes. Cold homes present an economic challenge and opportunity to the NHS. It has been estimated that the annual cost to the NHS of cold homes, not including associated social care costs, at £1.36 billion (Koksharov 2007). Age UK argues that costs can be offset by benefits to the NHS, comparing the one-off £7,500 cost of making a house energy efficient with the weekly cost of £1,750 to £2,100 of keeping an older person in hospital (Koksharov 2007).

There is a well-established connection between cold homes and physical and mental health conditions. The Marmot Review Team (2011) collated evidence on the effect of fuel poverty on health, identifying a range of direct impacts including: increased mortality rates during the winter months as a result of respiratory, circulatory and cardiovascular diseases; and mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety. They also identified indirect impacts: an increased presence of psychological symptoms in children; malnutrition; increased social isolation. Some conditions make individuals more susceptible to the impact of cold homes and older people are particularly prone (Koksharov 2007).

In the Oldham Warm Homes programme, occupants reported an increase in their health and wellbeing (Eadson 2014). Likewise, those receiving improvements under the Warm Front programme were less likely to report high levels of psychological distress than previously (Gilertson and Green, 2008). In 2014 a pilot 'boiler on prescription' project in Sunderland involved the CCG funding a range of home improvements including double glazing, efficiency boilers and loft, cavity and wall insulation. It was found that this contributed to outpatient visits falling by a third, attributed to improvements in mental and physical health and Dr Tim Ballard, vice chair of the Royal College of GPs, commented that the scheme 'needs to be seen as a wake-up call for commissioners. The big challenge now is to replicate this across the UK' (Carrington 2014).

Changes4Warmth, then, can be seen as one of a range of projects that is seeking to address fuel poverty and cold homes as significant determinants of health. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, its uniqueness is its focus on mental health and its close alliance with the dedicated mental health organisation, Changes Health and Wellbeing, in its conceptualisation, planning and delivery.

2. Methodology



2.1 Introduction

This research was commissioned by Beat the Cold as part of the evaluation of the Changes4Warmth project. It has been designed to complement existing monitoring and evaluation being routinely conducted as part of the project and, as such, to provide a more in-depth qualitative account of the experiences of staff and service users and the impacts upon them, as well as identifying lessons learned that can inform the design of future work on energy and mental health. It complements and builds upon a research project funded by the Cheshire Lehmann Fund, in which volunteers received training in qualitative interviewing and carried out fieldwork with peers in the Changes network (Sherriff, 2016).

2.2 The research

The research comprised qualitative interviews and focus groups. This methodology was chosen for its ability to provide an in-depth exploration of experiences and to allow a flexible approach in which emergent themes can be discussed.

One-to-one semi-structured interviews create the opportunity for a focused discussion in which it is possible to discuss sensitive issues such as personal finances and health. Focus groups provide forums

for interactive discussion in which participants can compare and build on each others' experiences, whilst recognising that participants may be less comfortable discussing sensitive issues with others. These qualitative methods lead to an understanding of the key themes pertinent to a research question and can aid the understanding of causality.

The participants can be grouped into the following cohorts:

- Service users within Changes who have participated in Changes4Warmth, principally through being the recipient of a home visit. These are members of Changes who receive support from the organisation.
- Volunteers within Changes who have in some way been more actively involved in Changes4Warmth. Owing to the nature and structure of Changes, these volunteers are also service users.
- Staff and trustees of Changes and Beat the Cold who were directly involved with Changes4Warmth.

The following sessions took place in July and August 2016:

- Individual interviews with two energy advisors and an operations manager employed by Beat the Cold.
- An individual interview with a member of Changes staff who had worked previously as a Changes4Warmth volunteer coordinator.
- A combined interview with the Executive Director of Changes and a lead trustee of Beat the Cold
- Individual interviews with two Changes volunteers in the Changes Stoke-on-Trent office.
- Individual interviews with two Changes volunteers in the Changes Burton-on-Trent office.
- A focus group with service users and Changes volunteers at the Changes Stoke-on-Trent office (10 participants).
- A focus group with service users and Changes volunteers at the Changes Burton-on-Trent office (6 participants).

With the consent of the participants, the interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim ready for analysis. The transcripts were anonymised such that none of the statements made in the interviews or focus groups could be traced to a specific individual. Analysis was carried out using NVivo 11 software, which facilitates coding of the data such that themes can be identified and explored.

2.3 Challenges and considerations

Recruitment for the volunteer and service user focus groups was challenging. We were asking people who were often without access to their own transport to give up their own time and to travel to the session. Added to these common practical research challenges, it is important to understand that the participants have sometimes severe and fluctuating mental health conditions.

More positively, familiarity with the Changes offices, where the service users often go for group meetings, was helpful, and made this a suitable location for the focus groups. A free lunch made the session a social activity. A raffle was also offered as an incentive, with prizes related to energy efficiency.

We benefited from the existing Changes communications networks in recruiting participants. Something that we were not able to achieve, however, was a clear distinction between service users, i.e. the recipients of home visits, and

Changes4Warmth volunteers who had had a more active involvement with the project, e.g. helping to promote it. This challenge was compounded by the inevitable overlap between these cohorts, since the volunteers had also been recipients of home visits and energy advice. Whilst it had been intended that there would be separate focus groups for these two cohorts and we devised communication materials to reflect this, it was not possible, or appropriate, to refuse participation to people who had travelled specially to attend a particular session: the focus groups were therefore mixed. The facilitator was able to manage this and, through the structure of the questions, ensured that the intended subject matter was covered. In fact, this situation yielded some interesting discussions between service users and volunteers.

It was also necessary to carefully separate Changes4Warmth from other Changes activities and ensure that people were referring to the former. Similarly, it was sometimes difficult to separate the impacts and benefits of home visits and active participation, since these were both seen to be under the same umbrella.

It was not always possible for participants to remember the details of their involvement with Changes4Warmth, including the home visits. This would be true of any focus group but can be understood to be particularly the case for people who are undergoing mental distress. The mental wellbeing of the group was also extremely important and, recognising that Changes service users suffer from a range of issues including stress and anxiety, no participants were pressured into speaking or sharing personal information.

It should also be noted that the participants, particularly the service users, insofar as they volunteered to take part in the discussions, were self-selecting. The service users who participated were very positive about the project, including one who had travelled in from a neighbouring town to express his gratitude for the provision of the energy visits. This may have resulted in some participant bias, but it was also the case that service users were willing and able to provide constructive criticism. Nevertheless, whilst the research identifies a range of benefits to service users, it cannot be assumed that all Changes service users were able to benefit from Changes4Warmth to the same extent.

3. Findings



3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents and discusses the findings of the interviews and focus groups conducted with staff, volunteers and service users.

It begins with the relationship between cold homes and mental wellbeing (3.2) and then the ways in which the approach of Changes4Warmth responds to this (3.3). The impact of the project on service users is then discussed (3.4), followed by more detail on the home visits element (3.5). Finally, it considers the two key challenges of building the relationship between Changes and Beat the Cold and working with volunteers and considers the ways in which the project responded to and, to varying extents, met these challenges (3.6).

It should be noted that it is the policy within Changes that service users need not disclose the nature or severity of their mental illness, and this piece of research respected this. Throughout this chapter, mental illness is therefore referred to in general terms. Interview and focus group quotations are from service users unless otherwise indicated.

3.2 The need for Changes4Warmth: cold homes and mental health

Living in a cold home

The service user interviews demonstrate the extent to which home comfort can be related to, worsen, and be complicated by conditions related to mental health and mental wellbeing.

Perhaps the most straightforward example of this relationship is that the experience of being too cold at home can make mental health worse:

Oh if it's cold you're miserable, I mean I've sat last winter and, you know, you want to stay in bed because you don't want to move... once you're in bed and you're warm.

Furthermore, being cold can limit what one is able to do, or has the motivation to do, in the home: *'and [when] it's cold all you want do is either go to bed because you can put, get in the duvet and that, I think that can make you depressed'.*

Interviewees gave examples of a cold home limiting their mobility within the house and the way in which this affected their mood. One person commented that *'or you're living in one room because you can't heat the rest of the house up... I think that makes your mental health ten times worse'*. Another described a similar situation:

you've got the fire on and you don't want to go anywhere else because it's freezing upstairs, you want to go to bed but then when you're in bed you don't want to come back down because fire's been turned off for the evening and it's cold again [laughs]. So yeah, it does, it does stem on my mental health a lot, definitely.

Reference was also made to physical conditions that are worsened by being cold and, in turn, cause stress or discomfort that affect mental wellbeing.

The challenge of managing energy use

The relationship between cold homes and mental health, however, transcends the impact of temperatures on wellbeing. It extends to the task of managing home heating and, in turn, household budgets.

On the one hand, when mental distress is severe, management of bills may be neglected: *'when you're going through like a really bad bit of mental distress, I don't know whether you know, the last thing on your mind is your utility bills'*. Interviewees described situations in which bills, or debts, had mounted up because they had not felt able to address them. One interviewee shared that they had been good at keeping on top of bills but when they became ill this became much more difficult: *'Because I was good at keeping my bills good, anyway – that's something I always used to do, until I became unwell and then it went a bit out of the window there'*.

On the other hand, the day-to-day experience of managing home energy can be stressful and made more difficult by levels of stress and anxiety, as this interviewee refers to in the case of buying credit for a prepayment meter: *'like I said I can't go out and buy gas and electric because if I don't want to go through that front door, I won't go through it, you know, it's left to my husband'*. Changing to direct debit was therefore something that this person found *'less stressful for me because I know that the electric's not going to go, and I know the gas isn't going to go and I know I haven't got to go out and walk up the shop'*.

A member of staff with experience of engaging with the service users observed that such issues are often relatively hidden, in the sense that they are not necessarily identified as contributing towards poor mental health: *'deep down it really was quite a worry for them, even though they hadn't, you know... come to discuss that... but once you get to helping with the gas and electric and things like that it's, it's one less thing for them'*.

Another telling comment suggests that the issue in part stems from a feeling of not fully understanding energy and a feeling of vulnerability, of 'being taken advantage of', that contributes to anxiety:

I'd just say like when, I mean anyone that uses Changes, you'll know you go there because you are in mental distress and you're trying to get well and you need that structure... you're going home and you're dealing with things that you don't understand... it is, it is distressing, it's frustrating because you feel like you're probably being taken advantage out of in some respect and you don't know how to, how to dig your way out of it.

Interviewees saw the task of interfacing with utility companies, including checking bills and negotiating tariffs, to be difficult. These quotes illustrate this and also indicate that the sometimes fluctuating nature of mental distress can mean that what is within reach one day can be very difficult the next:

it depends on your own mental state at the time as well... Because sometimes you think, like today I'm feeling pretty good, I could just go home, pick the phone up, no problem.

And it really annoys me and you get people who are ill, the last thing they want to do is sit on a computer when you're not very well and try and work your gas and the electricity out.

Interviewees recounted stressful situations that they had found difficult to deal with, including unexpected debt accumulation and not being able to afford to fix a broken boiler.

Summary

The interviews, then, strongly suggest a relationship between cold homes and mental health. Being cold in itself can deepen mental distress and worsen physical illnesses, which can in turn affect mental wellbeing. The experience of managing household bills, particularly on a tight budget, can be a source of stress and anxiety, and there is a suggestion that some service users are under-using their heating system out of concern that bills may be unaffordable. Conversely, mental illness can affect the ability of an individual to stay on top of bills, adding to stress and potentially resulting in anxiety about using the heating and in turn resulting in the service user underheating their home.

3.3 A distinctive approach

Mental illness, then, is something that can be worsened by cold homes and fuel poverty and can limit a householder's ability to ameliorate their own situation. As the above suggests, there are ways in which the lived experience of fuel poverty amongst mental health service users is different from that of the general population.

There is evidence that Beat the Cold energy advisors recognised that they needed to provide a service that is sensitive to this distinct experience and to the needs of Changes service users and takes account of possible vulnerabilities.

In some ways, this reflected Beat the Cold's existing approach. An energy advisor stated that they aim to avoid sounding:

like a know-it-all and saying, oh well you shouldn't be doing this and you shouldn't be doing that and, you know, you, that's just not the way forward at all, it's basically just a lot of listening and then saying oh have you thought about this or you, did you know about this?

One thing that was seen to be different with Changes4Warmth, however, was the extent of building ongoing relationships. This required some flexibility at a practical level:

... our normal day-to-day work is nine till five but... you know... they've gone to evening sessions because people [in the Changes network] would go to work and they go to their sessions seven o'clock at night and, erm, all over the place and [the energy advisors] have all been prepared to do that...

One example of this flexibility was from an advisor who returned out of working hours to speak to the partner of the service user because they were the one who dealt with energy in the house, as this service user recounted:

I says you can, you can sit and explain to me Jules and it will just go over my head, I says the best person you can speak to is my husband, and she took it out of her time for that extra hours to come and speak to my husband and I thought that was really good.

Here, an energy advisor captures the importance of a sensitive and flexible approach:

With this project it was like, it, it had to suit the client, and sometimes you went and I know I went to one and, and she says oh, you know, all this has happened and, and I'm not in a, I said right, that's fine... I'll go... and I'll contact you in a few weeks' time, see how you're getting on and, and, you know, and having that and people appreciated that understanding, or somebody would phone up and say I can't cope, you know, this has happened, that's happened, fine, no problem, we'll rebook it and because of the project we were able to do that.

They found that their ongoing relationship with Changes4Warmth and the service users meant that repeated contact, rather than one-off home visits or advice sessions, characterised their relationships in Changes4Warmth. This they related to the greater depth of support needed:

I think probably the main thing is that you're dealing with, you're coming across the people again and again, like I've done visits year-on-year when the tariff ends, things like that, when it comes to the Warm Home Discount, where they've got their, any problems, they are coming back to me whereas on other projects it can be, because it's within Stoke-on-Trent it can be any one of us or you don't get the same repeat, repeat visits, if you like, the same, you're not giving that same, I suppose depth of support, you are but because they've got to know us over the three years, they relate to you.

This ongoing relationship is an aspect of Changes4Warmth that Beat the Cold staff emphasised was different from their other projects.

The dedicated funding for the project allowed the energy advisors to feel that they could be as flexible as the needs of the service users required:

...if there was a major problem you could go back several times and the project allowed that without you thinking where's the funding coming for going now because I'm going back third, fourth, fifth time?

Summary

In delivering Changes4Warmth, Beat the Cold recognised that it is important to reflect an understanding of the particular experiences and needs of mental health service users. The dedicated funding for the project enabled them to take a more flexible approach and to build relationships with service users over a number of years.

3.4 Evidence of impact

Warmer homes, lower stress

Service users were very positive about the way the project had affected them. Gratitude and appreciation for the programme were themes that permeated the discussions with service users.

One positive outcome given in the interviews and focus groups was the increased ability to maintain a warm temperature in the home. As discussed above, interviewees had given examples of how being cold affected their physical health and mental wellbeing. This person had said they could not afford to have

the heating on while they were in bed during the day, but following support from the energy advisor and learning about their entitlements to financial support had *'been able have my heating on all the time, like from morning 'til ten and then the thing is I've also, same as [other service user], I'm also entitled to the disability, is it a hundred and forty, in't it, a year?'*. This reflected the effective reduction in their energy bills as a result of the subsidy from the Warm Home Discount.

Another had been better able to control their indoor temperature, resulting in more comfortable conditions:

Ultimately, it's more of a comfortable environment because on mine you'd sort of come in some days because of how my heating was working, you were either absolutely red-hot, roasted or it was cold, whereas now it just sort of stays one nice temperature and it's, it's comfortable.

Another had simply commented: *'I can keep warm now, which helps my mental health'*.

Service users also referred to reduced stress resulting from reassurance from the energy advisors. Knowing that they were on the best tariff for them, with the help of the energy advisor, appeared to be a source of reassurance: *'I think it made me feel safe in the knowledge that I was on a best tariff I could be on...'*

A common reason for the increased ability to heat the home was the availability of the Warm Home Discount, for which many people with mental health conditions are eligible, which made available more money to cover the heating bills and therefore in effect reduced the cost of heating:

It's the first winter so I'm a bit concerned, because you don't know, until you start getting your bill you don't know roughly how much it's going to be but I know it's not going to be unmanageable. Then I'm going to get, [the energy advisor's] going to help me get this £140 which, it just takes that worry off you.

This person, for example, describes how having a replacement boiler helped to improve their quality of life not only by reducing noise but also by increasing the reliability of the system and herefore reducing worry and stress:

Yes, because the noise used to drive me mad. So knowing there's nothing there to drive you potty and having something that I know is reliable and not going to break down on me – because I obviously had very tight finances – then yes, that took a lot of pressure off, because I thought if the boiler breaks down, what am I going to do? We're going to have no heating. So taking that pressure away helped – it helped loads as well.

Interviewees also spoke about learning how to operate the heating system effectively, as in this example of leaving the radiator on for longer to save it heating up again and again:

For me, if you put the radiator on, if you get the gas on to heating and the radiator warms up for like half an hour and you switch it off so you're not using any more gas. She said if you leave it on, it gets to a certain temperature and it doesn't use as much gas, it's just little tiny bits, just to keep at that temperature... I never thought of that that way.

Another appreciated being able to better judge when heating is needed with the 'cold alarm' they were provided with by Beat the Cold: *'I've got my alarm now so I know if it goes to cold, switch it on. I've got a couple of them, got one in the living room and one in the bedroom, little thermometer things and I'm not worried about the bills'.*

The project also helped to inform service users about potential practical changes that they could carry out:

I was decorating my bedroom, I thought, right, I've got make it warmer and everything and it's like when you decorate or do anything that I thought, right, I'll have the shutters and I'll have net curtains so that hopefully that's where the cold's going to, I think it does make you think.

This finding complements Changes4Warmth's own research (Appendix A) reveals a range of items installed in service users' homes as part of the project, as well as changes in behaviour amongst the service users.

Importantly, given the focus on mental health of Changes4Warmth, the impact of the programme can be understood in terms of the impact on the service users' overall recovery path, as this interviewee illustrates in relation to their boiler replacement:

So yes, it definitely has had a positive effect on helping me move forwards, and it still has now, just over 18 months on, it's still having that effect; because I know, come this winter, there shouldn't be any problems with it, and it's got a warranty on it if there is, and stuff like that. Yes, definitely had a positive effect.

Changes4Warmth's own research (Appendix A) shows self-reported benefits for mental health and wellbeing.

Ongoing support

Service users also benefited from a sense of knowing there is someone there to help with energy issues, therefore reinforcing the importance of the ongoing support element of Changes4Warmth, particularly in terms of being able to phone the utility provider:

My neighbour downstairs got it cheaper, so I tried to get it cheaper myself on the phone and they just weren't having it and he did put, he did put the phone down on me, so it does, they take all, like I say, [the energy advisors] take all the stress away because I just can't, some of us just can't deal with that, it's quite difficult.

I'm not good on the phone so it's nice to know there's somebody there that can do it for me if I sort of panic or anything like that, say if my husband was away or whatever and I was doing it on my own.

The element of the home visit that involved phoning the utility provider is discussed further below.

Summary

Service users reported benefits from having a warmer home. This is the result of a combination of the energy efficiency advice provided and the availability of the Warm Home Discount, which was effectively a subsidy that reduced the cost of heating. It is important to note the narrative of anxiety and stress reduction in these accounts: the ability to be warmer resulted to a large extent from a reduction in worry about the costs as a result of the subsidy and also through an increased understanding about how to use the heating system efficiently and being able to trust it not to break down. Additionally, the availability of ongoing support from Beat the Cold with their energy issues was a source of reassurance.

3.5 The role of home visits

Appropriateness

During the home visits, the energy advisors talk service users through the ways they use energy in their home, give them advice on how to save energy, and provide tools such as a home energy display. The advisor also demonstrates how to contact their utility company and ensure they are on the most suitable tariff. This is a core part of the project, and the service users' comments indicate that this has been well received.

Interviewees were very positive about the help afforded to them by the home visits, and part of this was the knowledge of the energy advisors when it came to deals available to them:

just how thorough... very well informed, really know their stuff... and they don't just sort of look at one website and go, oh, we can save this much, they actually went in and... she sort of looked at three or four different websites and sort of was picking the best deals and, which I would never have thought, I mean there was some companies that I'd never heard of... I was well impressed... and I know a little bit more about how to read a gas and electricity bill now.

One important question is the extent to which it was appropriate and effective to give energy advice in the form of home visits rather than adopting alternative approaches such as 'drop in' sessions. Generally speaking, interviewees appreciated that the home visits approach saved them travelling to the advice sessions, allowed the visit to be more personalised, and allowed the energy advisor to inspect energy consumption by reading the meter and make recommendations specific to their home

and configuration of appliances. This service user, for example, describes the importance to them of the energy advice session taking place in the home:

I think the home visit's good because when [the energy advisor] comes into your house you can see exactly what you've got, you do need that home visit because the thing is she walks around the house and she can say to you, oh well, you need a draught excluder here, we'll put your Owl [home energy display] on there where you need your carbon monoxide thing, I think she does need to come to your house because she needs to know what gadgets and things that you have.

However, some service users felt uncomfortable with the idea of an advisor coming into their home: *'I am, I'm awful for that, I don't want anybody in my house, I don't, yeah. You don't give your address out or anything, don't you?'*

In some cases, however, the perceived trustworthiness of the energy advisor and the clear explanation that it was useful to have advice at home helped. This person, for example, commented that they were not confident that they could have read the meter correctly themselves and therefore the idea of the home visit provided some reassurance – *'Because otherwise I could have tried to read it myself but, like I say, I don't understand all of that, I've no idea what it means, erm, I'd probably press the wrong thing or something and mess the whole thing up anyway'* – and reflected that it was *'easier for me to take that step back and, and realise that all they were doing was trying to help me'*.

This emphasised the importance of the perceived relationship of trust, and this is discussed further below. This quote further evidences the importance of trust: *'I say they are very friendly... you don't feel forced or like you have to do anything, it doesn't feel like it's benefiting them you doing anything, that their purpose is to help you, or that's how it came across anyway'*.

For those for whom a home visit was not a possibility, there were other possibilities to benefit from the project, although this person later mentioned that they had not benefited from the advisor phoning their utility provider for them, suggesting that the home visit itself was a more 'complete' service:

A home visit? I wouldn't have dealt with, I would never have done it; I still struggle with that now. I still wouldn't do that, but I found it easier to come down to the social, because it was a social group I had been doing, so therefore I knew the people at it. Or I would have made an appointment; that I would have managed as well.

Importantly, this person stated that they felt under no pressure to let the energy advisor come into their home and felt that the advisor had understood their situation: *'I think [they] picked up on that and sort of made me feel like it's okay, we can do it here instead if you, the only reason I'd be better coming to your house is because I can look at your meter and like'*.

Alternatives were in place for service users for whom inviting the advisor into their home was too difficult; for example, some met at one of the Changes offices to talk through energy issues. However, as indicated by the quote above, it appears that those who did accept a home visit may have benefited from a wider range of help and support.

Phoning the utilities

The act of phoning the utilities was highlighted as an important part of the home visit. Advisors carried this out on speakerphone so that service users could observe. In some cases, the demonstration helped service users to be more confident and say they could do this themselves. For others, and these appeared to be the majority, this was seen as something with which they would need ongoing support.

An energy advisor explained that this part of the home visit is particularly important; it responds to the potential for service users to benefit from discounts and tariffs whilst recognising that some service users experience financial and mental health barriers to them making the phone call themselves:

I mean you can say to them, look, you can apply for this, you can ring up... Sometimes they're on mobile pay as you go and it can cost, you know, they're hanging on and hanging on, yeah, sometimes they just haven't got that confidence, they don't know what they're asking, even though you've explained it and what have you, you know, and there's a lot of hand-holding if you like and encouragement.

Focus group participants expanded upon this, highlighting that internet-based solutions were not always the most practical for everyone:

I struggle you see because I'm not on computer.

I mean my phone is like the ark, I, I'm, I don't have no computer so before I start I, I haven't got a very good... straightaway.

Service users were divided on whether they would themselves phone up utilities, with unwillingness or discomfort tending to be the most common answer the group, as this focus group excerpt illustrates:

Moderator: How do people feel about phoning up utilities themselves?

(female) No, I still wouldn't do it, no.

(female) No.

(female) No.

(female) Absolutely no way.

(female) I don't know.

(male) I'm okay with it.

(female) I don't know enough and I'm not like I say, so I don't know sometimes, I don't know if I come across nasty sometimes when I try and be assertive so I think it comes over, over a bit wrong sometimes.

(male) You can get in a muddle, can't you?

(female) Yeah, yeah.

In some cases, this discomfort with making the call stemmed from previous bad experiences:

I'm quite, I've, I've got no issues with phoning people up, erm, you know, quite assertive like that, but then when I'm being called a liar from one of their managers, you know, and basically say, saying that... I'd changed from thing to, to something else and when I'm saying I haven't, you know, and they're going, well yes, you have.

This was, however, not a universal view, as this minority experience illustrates:

[the energy company] were absolutely fantastic, I could not fault them at all, they were marvellous, in fact I, they just rang me not long ago for, erm, and I've given them loads of good comments because they, they were wonderful.

Several service users were evidently impressed by the ways in which the energy advisors could deal with the utilities on the phone. One aspect of this was the amount of knowledge that the advisors had about what the individuals would be entitled to, which enabled them to be more assertive:

you've got to ask the right questions and one of the things I thought was brilliant with [the energy advisor], where she wouldn't say, well, is he entitled to this particular thing? Rosie would already know and she would say like, well I know that he's entitled to this and so I want that putting in place and, but it was just that, whereas a lot of the time with, if you don't ask you don't get.

One person, who had not had a home visit but rather received support through social events through the Changes network, had called the utility themselves but found this very challenging:

I got advice from one of the people from Changes4Warmth about contact details of which companies to get in touch with and stuff. They didn't actually contact them for me. I had to do the contacting; that was very hard. They just gave me the numbers to try or the email addresses to try or the websites to look at, but they didn't actually do it for me, which would have been helpful.

In some cases, the advisors were able to respond to specific challenges that service users were facing and get decisions overturned:

This is when I moved into the flat. The previous flat I was just on quarterly bills and when I moved in I was promised that I could change the meter from a card meter to a quarterly bill, and I moved in and they said, 'Well no, you can't.'... Then [the energy advisor] got involved and she was on the phone and she didn't take no for an answer. So she got it changed to a quarterly bill. She got it changed to a quarterly bill.

The same service user continued, evidencing the ongoing and responsive nature of the support being given:

She did it in, she had to do it in stages, we were with British Gas for both gas and electric, so she got the meter changed and I carried on with British Gas for a few weeks and once that was all done and sorted then she came back and did a search with all the companies, and she found [an alternative that] was best for me.

There is also evidence of an ongoing relationship with the energy advisors, in which the advisors were able to offer reassurance. In this case, for example, the service user was able to make the call themselves, but they describe the way the energy advisor was able to offer reassurance, highlighting that their role went beyond straightforward energy advice. The call related to problems with their meters:

I was panicking, it was a good job my son was in because I just couldn't cope. Anyway the fella come and he says I'm not touching them, they're dangerous and all this, blah blah blah, so I rang [the energy advisor], she calmed me down, reassured me. Anyway I did, I don't know how I did it but I plucked the courage up and I rang Western Power and, I tell you what, they were absolutely fantastic, took them two days to sort it out, there was nothing wrong with my meters.

This account also emphasises the ongoing and responsive support role of the advisors, which included returning to speak to other members of the household:

[The energy advisor] come and she spoke to them and yeah, she's done us quite a good saving but I'm, fortunately my meters aren't in at the moment, I have got a date for the twenty-first of September but they should have been put in on the third of August, but there was a problem so I rang [the energy advisor] up and she was very helpful... she was ever so good, and I don't do figures or anything, and she came back in an evening to speak to my husband as well, because he deals with all the money side of things.

Knowing that this support was available was beneficial for mental health, as this service user commented: *'it's just nice knowing that because I'm not good on the phone somebody can do it for me... then I'd get myself into a panic'*.

Whilst this support was greatly appreciated and evidently useful for the service users, references were also made to the potential, perhaps in a future iteration of the project, for help in dealing with other relevant organisations, such as housing providers:

it is too warm and all there is is two windows and because it's housing association, well it's not the housing association, it's the company, and I rang up and said how do I get it down? And they, they were asking me questions, I just didn't understand what they were saying.

Summary

The home visits, a core part of the project, were very well received by the service users who participated. It was recognised that there were advantages to carrying out the energy advice in the home, including reducing the need for the service user to travel and being able to refer directly to the appliances using energy in the home. It was also mentioned that service users may not have the confidence to read their meters or recount what heating technologies they have if they need to bring this information to an energy advice session outside the home.

However, some service users were not comfortable with an advisor coming into the home, and service users related this to their mental health. Within the project, it was also possible to receive energy advice outside the home, although there is an indication that these service users had a less 'complete' package of advice and support.

The part of the home visit when the advisor phones the utilities on the service user's behalf was seen to be useful, and in some cases this formed part of ongoing support. Subsequently, some service users felt confident to phone the utilities themselves, but this was a minority view and the research indicates that most service users perceive a need for ongoing support.

3.6 Challenges in delivery

Building a relationship

Building trust

A challenging aspect of this project was the development of a new working relationship between Changes and Beat the Cold. At the level of the organisation, Changes had no experience of working on energy efficiency and Beat the Cold, whilst experienced at working with vulnerable consumers, had no direct experience of work targeted at mental health service users. In the early part of the project, the idea of energy advice was something new within the Changes network and an initial challenge was to find ways to 'sell' the project to this network.

It was clear from the enthusiasm of the service users towards Changes that building a relationship with the network could help Beat the Cold become a trusted partner in providing energy advice. This quote from a discussion between service users illustrates the advantage of being associated with Changes:

(Moderator) ... you kind of implied actually that you trust Changes more than other organisations.

(Participant 1) Yes.

(Moderator) So if that be British Gas or...

(Participant 2) No, I wouldn't trust...

(Moderator) It would be a different matter really.

(Participant 1) You probably could, you could trust Changes but could you trust the utility company?

(Participant 2) No, I wouldn't trust the utility company. If the utility company – well, you know, they used to knock on the door, didn't they? 'We can save you money.' 'Go away.'

With this in mind, the idea of the support coming from within the Changes network was an important one, as a Changes staff member explained:

Having access to the people there, actually, that really need it. Because of the nature of mental health – I know when I was suffering from my anxiety and depression, the last thing I'd have wanted to do was ring up and argue with the likes of British Gas or any energy company – so to have that service in-house, it's really good.

The energy advisors found that they needed to work closely with the groups that comprise the network. An interviewee reflected on this learning process:

I think we early on realised, and throughout the three years, that the way of getting to the service users who we wanted to help perhaps wasn't through the management, it was through the centre managers who, they're called volunteer coordinators... and building up trust and relationships with them... it's a lot of, it's been down to the relationships that have been built up between [the energy advisors' team] over the three years and, and bringing [those] different centre coordinators onboard to understand the value of it.

The dedicated funding for Changes4Warmth facilitated this close level of involvement and relationship-building:

Yeah, yes, that's exactly what it was, yeah, as the dedicated funding to it enabled us to, to drop in to all the Changes meetings because they're all over the, Staffordshire and, erm, it's been really, it, I personally think it's been really useful and proved, proved successful as, as keeping in touch with these people all the time.

At a practical level, there was ongoing interaction between Changes and Beat the Cold, as this Changes staff member describes:

I had regular contact with the energy advisors and I saw [colleagues] often. I know that if I needed something I could ring up and, vice versa, they could ring me. I did have meetings up there as well, the same as I had meetings at my building. So it worked well.

Working together

One aspect of the project that the energy advisors felt helped them to build a relationship between the two organisations was their participation in the twelve-step mental health programme that is offered by Changes to service users and is also attended by all Changes staff. This, the energy advisors felt, helped them to better understand the experiences of, and empathise with, service users:

That was good, it was sort of understanding what Changes were about really that, so although it didn't, yeah, have anything to do with the energy of that, it's, it made me understand basically the kind, if you like the kind of, of problems these people had got when they were joining Changes so it, it helped me on that way... I think when you've got depression, anxiety and other mental health issues, I think it can be quite lonely, and I think going to that, that group sort of made me aware of that more.

More specifically, it helped them to understand how energy fitted into the lives of the service users and to put it in the context of their wider issues:

it really was quite a, a worry for them, even though they hadn't, you know... come to discuss that, obviously because they'd got other problems, but once you can get to helping with the gas and electric and things like that it's, it's one less thing for them.

This had implications for how the energy advisors approached the project and engaged with the service users:

it basically gave me an understanding, so that when I was dealing with people I could deal with them in a more understanding way and a more appropriate way... it was very enlightening.

It took time, then, to build a relationship of trust between the two organisations, and it was important to take into account the vulnerability of the members of Changes.

It is also important to recognise that this training did not necessarily equip the energy advisors to manage situations with all Changes users, especially at times of particular vulnerability, and it was necessary to call on expertise and experience from the Changes staff, as this energy advisor recalls: *'she'd obviously had a drink and every and just, I didn't even go into the property to be honest, because she was really, really depressed and suicidal at that point. I'm not experienced to deal with that'*.

One further issue, which was mentioned in the Stoke focus group and may have affected trust, was that there was some confusion over when the project was coming to an end. Some of the service users commented that they received conflicting information, receiving a message that the programme would end at a certain time and finding it was continuing after that point. One participant reflected that *'that sort of stressed me*

out a little bit', implying that he found it difficult to fulfil his role as a group coordinator without clear information: *'nothing majorly, but it was likely people going, oh, how long have we got left? And I'm thinking, don't know'*.

Embedding Changes4Warmth in Changes

When talking to the volunteers about building this relationship, they recalled perceiving some slight resistance in the early stages of the project, which interviewees attributed to what they saw to be an understandable need to ensure that the network continued to focus on the support and recovery needs of service users:

they're just obviously focused on people coming in and having their mental health sessions and their recovery, and, and quite, they've been quite resistant of letting the, our people in, to spread the word as it were, but through building up relationships.

Despite the enthusiasm of the interviewees towards the project, they recognised that there had been some 'suspicion' about the project at first, from themselves and people close to them. These service users, for example, are referring to being the recipient of a home visit:

(female) But I think people were suspicious at first.

(female) Oh my dad was, my dad says to me, I don't think this is the right thing to do and you're allowing them in your house and, no.

The service users recalled, however, that the energy advisors started to come to meetings and this helped them to understand what the project could offer:

Yeah and I think [the energy advisor] as well went round with a few of them, so they'd sort of made people aware, and that's pretty much sort of where I started getting involved as well, because I thought I like the idea of this, this sounds quite good.

Their presence within the Changes network appears to have been very important and provided a complement to the available written information:

(female) It was actually [one of the energy advisors] coming round to the group as well, as well.

(male) Yeah.

(female) Because I'd had the leaflets and I kept thinking to myself, I need to do that, I need to do that, but when she came round I thought, okay, now is my chance to actually say yes.

The relationship with the energy advisors was clearly very important, and service users talked about the importance of *'when you are not feeling very well'*, there being *'a face there that you know is going to turn up...'* and *'you feel as though she's supporting you'*.

This seemed to contrast with prior experiences of seeking help with energy-related issues, and it is implied that these were with utility companies: *'You don't feel as though you're dealing with somebody on the phone or anyone, there's an actual person there'*.

This building of trust was clearly very important, and the clarity of explanation, alongside the relaxed approach that sought not to place pressure on the service users, appears to be one of the factors that encouraged this:

(male) But like you've just said, when [the energy advisor] come in and you put a face to the actual what's going on.

(male) And she explained it in such a way that it was very simple, directly to the point but done in a, the correct way.

(male) She sort of come across as in, you know, there's no weird scams.

(male) You know, you're not signing anything away.

(male) It's just literally, you can, if you choose to, you welcome them round to the home and they just see how they can help you out.

One aspect that helped to build this trust was the availability of personal numbers of the advisors and a promise of continuity such that the advisors were known quantities – rather than, for example, a staffed helpline – which was seen to be important for the service users:

(female) And I think the fact that she leaves a phone number with you.

(female) So you know you can phone her and you're going to get [the energy advisor] on the other end of the phone.

(female) I think, I think that's a big thing as well.

(female) Because I think, I think people who aren't very well or mental health or whatever, you need that one-to-one constant, you don't want people changing

Responsiveness was also seen to be important, and one member of staff in Changes mentioned that it was positive that bookings were made quickly: *'as soon as that member needs that visit, one phone call and that appointment's booked'* and, they continued, *'for people who are in mental distress that's a big thing... needing that structure... they know what's going to happen... and they provide that'*.

It also appears to be important that this was more than just information, but also an offer of assistance in doing something with that information:

Also the fact that she'd actually do it because you'd be, you'd be aware of you're probably paying way too much for your energy but you're also aware that you, you don't really know what you're talking about and where.

(female) Don't understand it.

(male) Where do you start?

(female) Yeah.

There was a sense in the focus groups that the project had 'opened up' the issue of energy and financial stress and also helped them to feel that this was something they had some control over:

(female) ... about money.

(male) I think before it was, you, you'd have just, you just wouldn't open your mouth.

(male) You'd be that far sort of thinking that you just couldn't cope with it.

(female) I also believe that people didn't realise they'd got a choice, and I think [the energy advisor] opened doors.

(female) Well, yeah.

(female) To say, well, hang on a minute, if I can get it cheaper then please.

Spreading the word

This ongoing discussion within the Changes network was evidently very important, and stories of successful home visits helped to make others feel that this was a possibility for them:

We had them in the group when they're coming in, when they say, oh, I've had [the energy advisor] this week, I've saved so much, then another week later, oh, by the way everyone, I've had [the energy advisor], I've saved so much (service user).

The potential for financial savings, and the associated lowering of stress, can be understood to have spread by 'word of mouth':

Um, they go round the house, but I think once that first person had it done and they've said how much they'd had saved, I mean three hundred and fifty pound isn't a small amount, that was me on my own, and other people'd say, oh, I've had two hundred, and then probably no-one would need anything for a couple of weeks, then it'd be somebody else.

This informal peer review seemed to provide reassurance for those who may have been anxious about having a home visit: *'without that service user saying it to another service user, you may not have got that visit...'*

And it's for people who are a bit wary and think, oh, you know, I don't want somebody coming to my house or, or I'm not sure you can do anything for me, it sort of encourages them to say, yeah, okay, I'll have a home visit.

Once one person had had the home visit then *'the ice had been broken'* and *'I think it got easier after that'* – focus group participants described it as *'a chain reaction'*.

Similarly, as new members joined they could find out about the project and hear about others who had benefited from it. A service user explained how he would introduce new members into the scheme:

I don't sort of ask them what money you're on, anything like that, it's just like, well, are you aware there's another service available for people, to help them with regards to anything to do with fuel poverty or to do with? Like we just said, actually, it isn't even all about that, it's also about the fact as, half of the time you can't understand the bills as they come through, the bills.

This became a strategy and it was recognised that it was important for the group coordinators, themselves volunteers, to be recipients of home visits and to be able to tell others about them:

(male) I think initially, I, correct me if I'm wrong [name removed], was it when, it was a while ago wasn't it where a lot of the coordinators were all invited in? Because one of the main ideas was to say, well, us guys sort of try get in there first to see what we think of it and obviously, it was obviously positive and the beauty of it then, wasn't it, we could just pass it to the, the rest of the group?

(female) I think with, like with anything, unless you've tried it yourself, you can't sell it effectively.

(female) actually had that personal experience, that made it easier but had they not had, had they not done that, I think it was just a case of, of giving a leaflet over and hoping they were saying the right words.

Summary

In summary, the gradual building of a relationship between Changes and Beat the Cold appears to have been an essential part of the project and facilitated a wider reach for the energy advisors. This was aided by Beat the Cold staff attending the Changes training programme, which helped them to understand the experiences of the service users. The interviews suggest that it was also positive that the energy advisors attended Changes meetings and introduced themselves. This helped service users feel more comfortable contacting them, as they were familiar faces and were now associated with the Changes network. As the project progressed, news about it and the potential benefits to be enjoyed from home visits spread through the Changes network, and this appears to have reduced anxiety about it and encouraged service users to take part by arranging a home visit – in this sense, the Changes members became advocates of Changes4Warmth.

Service users as volunteers

Potential for volunteer involvement

There was an intention from the beginning that the volunteers, i.e. service users, would assist with home visits and, although this was realised in only a minimal way, volunteers were involved in other ways, including helping to promote the project, designing materials, and taking part in research. The coordinators of groups within the Changes network, who were already volunteers but not specifically for Changes4Warmth, took part in an energy efficiency course early in the project:

We made it very clear that, that we hoped, our original aim was that we would have at least some that would be able to give some basic energy advice and we'd have this vision of them going in pairs and doing some introduction work, and that's come very much from ideas that we had at the, at the pre, at the project planning stage when we did focus groups, and some of them had said that people wouldn't, unless they came with somebody that they knew.

Although commentators agreed that the level of service user volunteering was not as extensive as had originally been envisaged, service users were involved in a range of ways from helping to promote the project to helping to design materials, such as a thermometer card, contributing to the website, and taking part in research. In a general sense, there was some confirmation that these activities had had a beneficial impact, as this coordinator explained:

From speaking to the volunteers before, I'd say I've noticed the positive impact in their own lives, because they've got additional training, they have things to do in the day, so they can come out, they can socialise with people and make new friends, and they were learning new skills that they can apply in the future.

This volunteer recalled the sense of confidence they received from presenting to professional people:

Yeah, so beneficial side, well I was talking to people, professors, doctors, Chief of Police, some very high-statured people, and it sort of gave me the inside of, yeah, okay, they've got all these job roles and titles but at the end of the day they're all human beings exactly the same as me, so it sort of broke the ice for me, so now I, I don't get as anxious or nervous, so I could happily stand up and talk to a thousand people or more, or talk to one or two people, but before that actually happened I was confident in a smaller group but now, because I did that as well, as a result of it I now know I can actually have the confidence to talk to a, a much wider group with ...

Changes already had an established network of volunteers and, whilst Changes4Warmth worked directly with this, there was a sense that it added to it and provided other, different ways of engaging: *'I'd say without a doubt that the few volunteers who've come forward, it's given them a, quite a different volunteering opp[ortunity], experience to, to what they do for Changes'*.

A member of Changes staff commented that one of the volunteer group coordinators had relayed to them: 'Someone in my group had an issue with this, but because of what I've learned with Changes4Warmth, I was able to guide them in this direction'.

A survey carried out by Beat the Cold within the network of Changes volunteers in February 2015 suggests a mixed experience, however, with some service users benefiting greatly from substantial involvement and others unaware of the opportunity:

It has aided my self-knowledge and recovery. I feel more in control of my life and health. I have a greater sense of purpose and self-esteem. My confidence has improved. All benefits are resulting of knowledge and promotion of steps. Also challenging myself in training and coordinating groups.

All volunteers get involved and this is empowering.

Not seen many volunteers other than on a course.

I haven't been involved too much.

Sorry but I don't actually know anyone who volunteers for C4W.

It is therefore not clear if the service users felt that volunteering was necessarily open to them.

However, over half of the respondents to the survey answered the closed question 'Has volunteer involvement been useful?' with 'quite a lot' (12) or 'a lot' (24).

Volunteers as informal energy advisors

Whilst it certainly didn't become the norm, one volunteer had attended a few home visits as an 'extra' to provide a 'friendly face from Changes' for people who were 'scared' about the home visit: *'If there's somebody got someone turn up at their doorstep they don't know who it is or anything, then I can be someone they recognise'*. This volunteer also mentioned being there and being able to talk to the service user while the energy advisor was doing other things, such as checks around the house. They mentioned that they would like to do more of these visits but had not been approached by the energy advisors: *'I've done not many of those, because they haven't come back to me for whatever reason'*.

However, the discussions implied that there was also the potential for the volunteers to act as informal energy advisors. Service users related this to a boost in self-esteem through being more confident when helping others. This volunteer, for example, described being able to help people in their Changes group:

But the, yeah, the upside of it is a lot of the time people can sort of come into the group and they go, well, what I've got a certain type of meter.

Can I save money with that? And it's like, well, hang on a minute, what type of meter have you got? I mean I can't remember everything but, you know, certain meters I can go ooh, I remember that, yeah, it, you know, some of them have got a standing charge to them or, and I think just knowing the different types is a big thing as well.

Another anticipated that some training would enable them to take on this role, relating it to self-esteem:

Again, for me, I'm a right nerd, and being able just to talk to someone in general. If someone's just chatting to me outside of here, or in here, and I can put some tips across and recommend your service and say, for example, suggest something, then I look really clever and may make them feel really impressed and give them the confidence to then seek advice and stuff. So yes, again, that will give me self-esteem – not to be bigheaded, because I'm not like that...

This service user continued, giving a specific example of being able to help a family member:

Say, for example, I say something to them – because my Dad's been chronic with our thermostat, he's treating it like a switch; but he's getting a bit dementiary type. He'll get cold, so he turns it down. He gets hot, so he turns it right up. He never used to be like that – but yes, I could just say, for example, just give them a couple of things, or whoever, wherever I go to, I can just give tips to them in conversation or something...

...Yes, confident and self-esteem. It makes me feel a lot better in myself. I like to help people, so that makes me feel better as well. Yes, it really boosts me, energises me, that does.

volunteer did work in the Beat the Cold office for a while, but reportedly their health became worse and this made it difficult for them to continue over a longer term.

Importantly, the focus of the service users is on recovery and they do not necessarily want to stay connected or be associated with Changes once they feel they have made a recovery: *'a massive learning thing from it, because the nature of their problems, their main target is to get better, and... when they get better or they're improving, they're off'*.

There were also practical and logistical challenges associated with arranging for volunteers to attend the energy advisors' rounds, the nature of which made it difficult to respond flexibly to the potential needs of the volunteers whilst also keeping up the pace of visits to service users' homes: *'Yes, because two of them didn't drive, so they relied on buses. It would mean getting a lift, in which case, obviously, they'd have to either find their own way back or they'd be there with the energy advisors all day'*.

Limited volunteer involvement

Notwithstanding this potential for volunteer involvement, those who commented on this issue felt that the project had not been able to develop the volunteering aspect sufficiently, or as much as had been envisaged.

A range of challenges were reflected upon by the interviewees. These included changes in staff, illness and volunteers leaving for employment. The first of these related to the paid volunteer coordinator changing several times during the project, making it difficult to keep continuity and also to build relationships between the coordinator and the volunteers. Given the diverse needs and vulnerabilities of the potential volunteers, this role was particularly important, as was the continuity of their relationship with volunteers. The volunteer coordinator provided ongoing support, which included general advice and encouragement as well as assistance with transport and logistics.

However, it was also observed that the cohort of potential volunteers is distinctive in that it comprises people who are suffering from sometimes severe and fluctuating mental health problems, making it difficult for them to commit to specific activities at specific times and places. One

It was also recognised, in addition by service users, that the fluctuating nature of some mental health issues made it difficult to plan around volunteers whilst at the same time delivering a service that responded to service users' needs.

Appetite for involvement

Notwithstanding these challenges, the potential to make more of volunteer involvement in the home visits was mentioned by the service users and it was felt that this would be advantageous in terms of making recipients of home visits more at ease:

(Moderator) Do you, can, do you think the programme would have been different if you guys had been able to do home visits as well?

(female) Because we've got personal relationship with a lot of our members.

...

(female) Because they come to us week after week after week, so we've got to know, obviously, the story they tell us.

...

(female) Obviously we don't know everything about the more personal details, but we know them and they, like we've said, they kind of trust us to a degree, trust that what we're saying is.

They hinted that there were people in the network who were concerned about having a home visit and felt that having a Changes member in attendance may have helped:

(Participant) Yeah, I think one of the things that we, what would have benefited was where if we were able to do some of the home visits, I know, again, confidentiality, a few members that were still extremely wary of letting somebody in and I, I know myself, I got asked and I think, I know Chas got asked as well.

(female) Yeah.

(male) Was, well, can you guys do it? Can you come along? Because they wanted that familiarity of somebody there.

Interest in training

Related to this appetite for greater involvement was an interest in further training. Interviewees and focus group participants expressed interest in training, including further training for those who had had it already. They recalled that further training had been mentioned but expressed slight frustration that this had not been followed through:

...some of us were offered additional training, I mean this, as you know yourself, I'm a volunteer for Changes4Warmth, and a lot of the stuff just, it just didn't seem to happen, erm, I mean initially we were told that we could have a little bit of training, additional training and then perhaps go out with [the energy advisors] as part of the home visit and, to my knowledge, I, I don't think that actually happened.

The discussion amongst the service users showed an appetite for more training:

(male) I was just going to say in actual fact, yeah, it's not the [case that] we're, we're complaining, saying the training was rubbish or anything like that, it wasn't, it was good and we really enjoyed it, and the point is we were like.
(female) We wanted to do more, didn't we?
(male) Yeah, we wanted to do a lot more and I mean, me personally, I'd still want to do a lot more, so hopefully the funding will become available and we can go and do some additional training.

As well as this interviewee:

Equally, I've not approached Changes, but then nothing's been... If it's announced, there's training on offer, put your names down, then I would have said, 'Oh yes. Can I put my name down?' If I'd had it offered to me I would have accepted it, as opposed to chasing it. If I don't know anything's on offer, then I can't chase it.

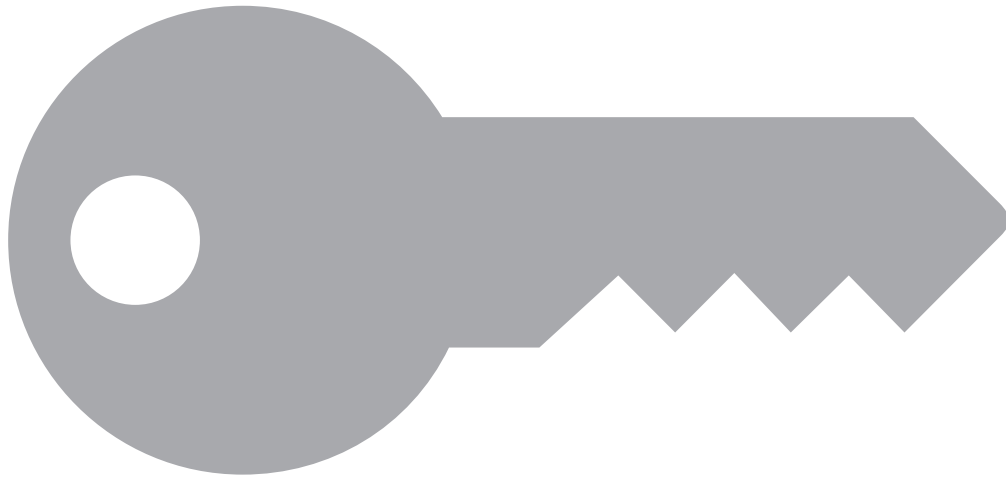
Whilst this was seen by the service users to be an issue with funding availability, they also related it to a need for training to be flexible and meet their diverse needs, implying that this would better enable the project to reach out to the service users:

(male) I think you need to go to the training, for people to dip in and dip out as, as we need to, or if their confidence has fallen back they can go back in, so different training for different levels, so, certainly that for starters anyway, and possibly more diversified training as well, erm.

In summary, whilst service users in the Changes network were able to act as volunteers, taking on particular tasks within the project and contributing more generally to promoting it and involving other Changes members, the extent of service user involvement was not as great as was originally intended. Some volunteers received training early on in the project but the plan to involve them directly in home visits was not realised.

It appears that there are a number of reasons for this: logistical and organisational challenges were certainly important, as was the change in personnel with regard to the volunteer coordinator in particular. There is clearly an appetite amongst at least some of the service users to receive more training and to be involved more directly in the delivery of home visits if the practical challenges can be overcome, and they suggest that this would be beneficial in terms of reducing the anxiety of the recipient of the home visit.

4. Conclusions



This chapter summarises the findings from the research discussed in the previous chapter into a set of conclusions.

There is a multifaceted link between the issues of fuel poverty and cold homes and experiences of mental wellbeing. This is bidirectional: on the one hand, being cold and the stress of managing heating and energy bills can have a negative impact on mental health; on the other hand, aspects of mental distress such as stress and anxiety can make it more difficult to ‘keep on top’ of home heating and finances. This can result in a vicious circle, in which being cold contributes towards ill health, which in turn makes it more difficult to achieve a warm home affordably.

There is evidence that the Changes4Warmth approach has had a positive impact on service users in a number of ways. In the home, it has helped to increase energy efficiency, lower fuel bills, and help service users understand their bills, whilst achieving adequate comfort. This has had an impact on mental wellbeing not only through thermal comfort but also through reduced stress over bills and appliance reliability. It is not clear, however, whether there is a trend towards using less energy, since many service users report taking advantage of discounts and appropriate tariffs to increase consumption.

Experiences of fuel poverty amongst mental health service users demand a tailored approach to energy advice and support. This needs to be sensitive to their potential levels of stress and anxiety, respond to specific symptoms, and be flexible enough to accommodate the often fluctuating nature of mental distress. This implies a need for dedicated funding in addition to core energy efficiency work that enables the delivery organisation to meet the needs of service users.

The research indicates that home visits are an effective part of energy advice, given their potential to reduce the need for service users to travel, and can respond to specific energy issues and opportunities in the home. However, not all service users will be prepared to allow advisors into their home – this may relate to mental distress, and may vary over time. Alternatives were offered as part of Changes4Warmth, but there is a suggestion that the service users who opted for these alternatives did not get as complete a package of advice and support.

In establishing Changes4Warmth as a trusted service within the Changes network it has been important to build relationships over time, necessitating a time-intensive approach. This has benefited from the continuous involvement of the energy advisors at group meetings and also through word of mouth from service users who have received and benefited from the service.

Participation in the 12-step Changes training programme helped the energy advisors to better understand the conditions of the service users and therefore to approach the task with greater empathy. There is evidence that they adapted their approach to energy advice as a result of this. This can be seen to be part of bringing the cultures of the two organisations together to work on the project.

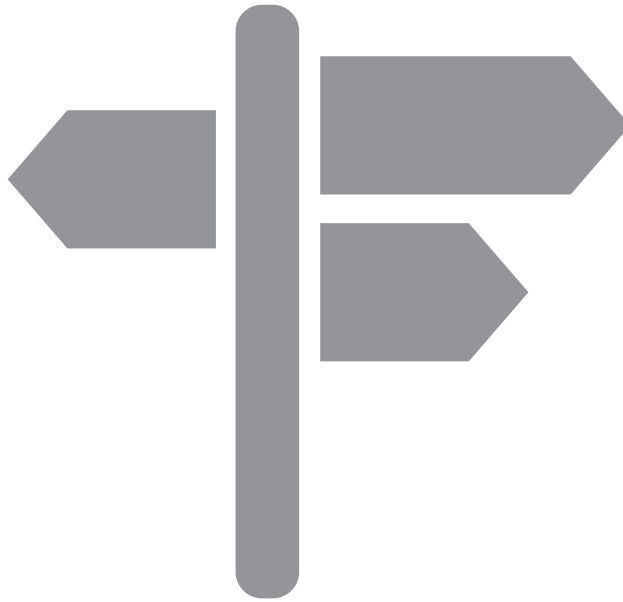
The research suggests that the combination of advice and support is particularly useful. This relates in particular to the process of phoning utilities and applying for discounts such as the Warm Home Discount, and appears to be particularly pertinent in the case of mental health service users, who may find certain tasks particularly challenging.

Members of the Changes network appreciate and benefit from the ongoing relationships formed with the energy advisors and the level of personal contact afforded by them. Attendance at the Changes meetings and the flexibility to carry out repeated home visits and provide ongoing support is an essential element of this, particularly for mental health service users.

Volunteers (a subset of service users) in the Changes programme (e.g. group coordinators) benefited from some training in the initial part of the project, and expressed an interest in further opportunities. Despite plans for greater involvement and the enthusiasm expressed by volunteers, they were involved in home visits in only a minimal way. It appears that the involvement of service users in home visits may help to make the approach palatable to a wider range of the cohort.

The research suggests that this volunteer enthusiasm has not been capitalised upon and that this represents a missed opportunity. The research highlights specific factors that contributed to this situation, including staff turnover and challenges specific to the user group in following this up. Staff turnover appears to be particularly important given the amount of tailored ongoing support required by participating mental health service users.

5. Future Directions



This section distils the findings from the research into a set of recommendations that can inform the development of Changes4Warmth and any bids for future work on the important relationship between cold homes and wellbeing. Some of the interviews included discussion about future directions, and the thoughts of the interviewees are also reflected here.

- Continue to provide advice and support to mental health service users on cold homes and fuel poverty, recognising the particular importance of this being based on ongoing relationships. The research suggests that this will necessitate securing funding that enables an intensity and continuity of support that goes beyond current energy advice services.
- Continue to work through the Changes network to develop the Changes4Warmth model in a way that recognises the unique network and community of Changes, acknowledging the importance of this in forming a trusted and accessible service.
- Continue to enable service users to benefit from home visits whilst finding ways to (a) make these more acceptable to a wider range of people and (b) develop alternative approaches that mean that service users can benefit as much as possible without inviting energy advisors into their home.
- Investigate other avenues for accessing vulnerable people, such as other mental health services, primary care, social housing and other support organisations; develop and test a delivery model.
- Further develop the 'offer' to volunteers as part of the project so that it can bring added wellbeing benefits to participating service users and also increase the potential for the service to reach out sensitively to a cohort of vulnerable people. Recognise that volunteers are likely to be vulnerable and need support, and provide staff capacity to provide for this.
- Investigate ways of widening the support available (perhaps drawing on the skills of other agencies) beyond liaison with utility providers to include other agencies related to housing such as landlords and repairs services.
- Review the 'mainstream' practices of Beat the Cold with a view to learning lessons from Changes4Warmth and being more inclusive of vulnerable populations.
- Anticipate, and prepare coordinators and management for, changes in staffing and volunteer capacity. Put in place measures that ensure effective handover and skill-sharing throughout the course of the project.

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Appendix

Beat the Cold carried out their own ongoing research through a questionnaire to service users administered by phone approximately 6 months after their home visit.

- When asked 'Are you worried about your fuel bills?'
27% answered 'not at all', 20% 'quite', 2% 'slightly', 25% 'sometimes' and 25% 'very'.
- Similarly, when asked 'Do you feel able to deal with your fuel bill?'
10% answered 'not at all', 22% 'slightly', 21% 'fairly well', 25% 'sometimes' and 21% 'very well'.
- Participants were asked if they had taken any actions to save energy following the home visit:
27% had taken none, 31% 'a few', 35% 'quite a lot' and 6% 'lots'.
- Participants were then asked to specify what they had had installed as a result of the home visit:

Loft insulation, 15% of respondents	15%
Cavity wall insulation, 10%	10%
New boiler, 4%	4%
Hot water tank jacket, 2%	2%
Room thermostat, 17%	17%
Central heating programmer, 10%	10%
Radiator thermostat, 8%	8%
- Participants were then asked what action they had taken themselves in the home:

Turning down the thermostat, 38%	38%
Switching off lights and appliances when not in use, 65%	65%
Closing curtains at night, 48%	48%
Installing radiator shelves/foil backing, 2%	2%
Blocking up open fire to reduce draughts, 6%	6%
Installing draught excluders, 23%	23%
Using steamers or pressure cookers, 15%	15%
Filling kettle with only as much water as needed, 50%	50%
Doing full laundry loads, 33%	33%
Stopping drying clothes on the radiators, 13%	13%
- Respondents were asked 'Has advice and support from Changes4Warmth improved your mental health?':
5% answered 'not at all', 4% 'not much', 27% 'a bit', 31% 'quite a lot' and 23% 'very much'.
- Respondents were asked 'Has advice and support from Changes4Warmth improved your physical health and wellbeing?':
17% answered 'not at all', 8% 'not much', 35% 'a bit', 25% 'quite a lot' and 15% 'very much'.
- Respondents were asked 'Has Changes4Warmth improved your confidence and ability to keep your home warm enough for health and comfort at a reasonable cost?':
6% answered 'not at all', 4% 'not much', 27% 'a bit', 25% 'quite a lot' and 35% 'very much'.

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