

## Reaching Fuel Poor Families

## Research Summary

**This research investigated ways of engaging families with fuel poverty assistance, and assessed the current and potential role of Children's Centres in this. It found that these centres can play a significant role in engaging fuel poor families, especially if schemes are long-term and work in partnership with other local organisations. It makes recommendations for how local authorities, government, energy companies and the third sector can support engagement with fuel poor families through Children's Centres.**

### Background

There are currently an estimated 2.23 million children, in 1.08 million families, in fuel poverty in England<sup>1</sup>. However, last year, ACE estimated that only 2.9% of national energy assistance budgets would reach fuel poor families. Take-up of fuel poverty assistance among families is a key concern for policy-makers, service providers and energy companies.

Community-based approaches using trusted intermediaries can be a cost-effective way to engage vulnerable households. One group of local intermediaries is Sure Start Children's Centres. There are around 3,116 Children's Centres in England, often located in low-income areas. Our analysis shows that an estimated 77% of fuel poor families live within one mile of a Children's Centre. This means these centres offer a potentially valuable opportunity for engaging families with fuel poverty support.

### Research aims and methodology

This research aimed to investigate effective ways of engaging families with fuel poverty assistance, and focused particularly on assessing the current and potential role of Children's Centres. The methods used were:

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ukace.org/2014/02/fuel-poverty-2014-update/>



- Review of 25 schemes in local areas across England. We looked at the design and structure of these schemes, and, where possible (based on contact with scheme representatives), their strengths, limitations and lessons learned.
- In-depth case study of one fuel poverty scheme run through Mortimer House Children's Centre in Bradford. Data was gathered through face-to-face interviews, conversations and observations, with the

participation of 24 energy advice users, 13 non-users and six staff members.

- In addition, the project drew on recent unpublished research by The Children's Society on the impacts of fuel poverty on families and children. This research used eleven case study interviews with people in Bradford, Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire.

### Findings

The findings of the research show that the complex situations experienced by fuel poor families may result in particular drivers and barriers to their take-up of assistance, with implications for scheme design and delivery. As trusted community hubs, with an extensive national coverage and reach to low-income areas, Children's Centres have potential to make a significant contribution to engaging fuel poor families.

### Why should Children's Centres be involved in work with fuel poor families?

- Families already use these centres, so they offer access to this time-constrained audience, and there can be cross-promotion across different sessions at a centre. Fuel poverty work can sometimes be integrated into existing sessions
- Centres are often situated in low-income areas and often have good take-up by vulnerable people
- Centre staff are often trusted by clients, and have good local connections and relationships
- Centres offer an opportunity to build long term relationships with clients and with communities
- Existing advisors and family support workers may be highly trained and experienced in advice work, and have transferable skills that can support the project (including language skills)
- Centres may offer an opportunity for childcare or children's activities alongside sessions

### What limitations should scheme designers be aware of?

- Attendance may be poor at one-off events, because of a lack of sustained interaction and awareness. However, it may be difficult to get funding for long-term work
- The popularity of events, and levels of trust, may depend on whether the scheme is perceived as local or external, which can be affected by the level of Children's Centre involvement
- Some people do not like talking about personal information or energy problems in a public setting (and even a one-to-one session may not feel as comfortable as a home visit)
- Some centres may be dominated by less vulnerable clients
- Open sessions at centres are not ideal for targeting one group, such as children with asthma
- Group sessions can be noisy and chaotic, so need careful design and skilled facilitators

### What are effective routes to engagement?

- Face-to-face contact in a place where people already are
- Cross-promotion between sessions at a Children's Centre, and tying fuel poverty sessions into existing activities
- Word-of-mouth, especially in promoting regular or repeated events.
- Door-knocking only by people (or organisations) that householders trust, such as family support workers
- Provision of home visits to housebound people
- Participating in local referral networks and partnerships with other organisations
- Foreign language provision (an important way to engage some of the most vulnerable groups)

### What should be considered in the design and structure of a scheme?

- The role of the Children's Centre: programmes that are seen as local or 'embedded' may be trusted more than those run by external organisations (with a Children's Centre as a venue). The higher the level of Children's Centre involvement, the more the scheme will benefit from its trusted reputation.
- Effective partnerships: these ensure the necessary expertise is available to clients and advisors, and address clients' multiple problems. There should be referral mechanisms, ideally to partners that have an established relationship with the scheme.
- Long term approaches: these allow the development of awareness, trust, and relationships with clients and the wider community, which result in high take-up rates.
- Designs of event: these include running group workshops, visiting existing sessions, and giving one-to-one advice. Offering diverse forms of access is helpful.
- Provision for children: an ideal solution is to provide childcare during sessions, or special activities for children alongside a workshop for adults (or just some toys and space to play).
- Alternative/complementary approaches: for example, home visits and referrals can be effectively used alongside centre sessions.
- Both generalist and specialist advice have advantages, and the balance will depend on the specific scheme; a good approach is to incorporate both generalist and specialist (fuel poverty) advisors within one scheme.

### What are key attributes for an advisor?

- Appropriate training in provision of high-quality advice

- Good knowledge of energy issues, especially those most affecting their client base
- 'People skills', especially a non-judgemental and friendly style, and ability to build trust into client relationships
- Training and experience in dealing with difficult household circumstances and making referrals
- Understanding of wider issues such as debt and the welfare benefits system (especially because of the use of benefits as eligibility criteria in fuel poverty assistance schemes)

### **Recommendations for policy**

This study suggests a range of detailed recommendations, of which a few are presented here.

#### Local authorities

- When commissioning for Children's Centres in areas with high levels of fuel poverty, Local Authorities (LAs) should consider including explicit reference to undertaking work to address fuel poverty amongst families with children in the local area.
- Involve Children's Centres and their providers, where appropriate, in funding bids or competition submissions (e.g. to DECC) that they are developing on fuel poverty
- In a future area-based approach to fuel poverty, play a key role as co-ordinators and deliverers of assistance. In doing this they could ensure the potential of Children's Centres in engaging fuel poor families is fulfilled, and they play an active role in scheme delivery.

#### National government

- Promote and support the sustainable use of Children's Centres (and other community based services) in fuel poverty

assistance schemes. For example, if ECO were to become a fund, then some of this could be ring-fenced for projects delivered in partnership with community services such as Children's Centres. If the obligation structure remains, then there could be a quota for delivery of measures to families with children, or alternatively, obligations could be quantified in terms of people (not households) benefiting from measures, with the effect of incentivising assistance to families.

- Consider the potential role of Children's Centres in other policies and funding streams, such as health-focussed programmes (e.g. Warm Homes Healthy People) and support this role.
- Consider the role of Children's Centres in the design of any future area-based fuel poverty interventions. Other community hubs might also be valuable, and different hubs might work for other groups; e.g. libraries, churches and lunch clubs for older people.
- The best way to ensure families with children receive fuel poverty assistance is to provide this automatically. The Warm Home Discount (WHD) is one crucial form of assistance, but because of lack of automatic entitlement and confusing eligibility criteria, many families in need of support miss out. The Government should move low income families with children to the core eligibility group for the WHD, so that the discount is applied automatically to their energy bill.

#### Business and industry

- Form partnerships with Children's Centres, which will help meet obligations in a cost effective way, and ensure support goes to those families who are most in need. This could include giving training to Children's Centre staff on topics such as measures and offers available, and eligibility criteria.
- However, ensure Children's Centres are sustainably funded in supporting this work.

Fairly recompense intermediary charities/organisations (e.g. for delivering referrals for the ECO), and inform organisations about the obligation and their value in fulfilling it.

#### Third sector organisations

- Children's Centre providers can encourage and support their centres to offer fuel poverty advice and assistance, in order to improve the health and wellbeing of their clients. A key way to do this is to build partnerships with corporations and seek other sources of funding, in order to build a resource base.
- Organisations that are focused on energy could consider working with Children's Centres, and especially doing this through long-term partnerships within which the centre plays an important role.
- All third sector organisations could consider how they can help to create and strengthen referral networks for fuel poor families (including for the non-energy issues they face).

#### **Project information**

Outputs from this study can be downloaded:

- The full project report and executive summary
- The report to Mortimer House Children's Centre

These are available at:

<http://www.eagacharitabletrust.org/index.php/projects/item/reaching-fuel-poor-families>

and:

<http://www.ukace.org/2014/10/reaching-fuel-poor-families-final-reports-published/>

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