



**Association for the
Conservation of
Energy**



Reaching Fuel Poor Families

Policy Briefing

New research investigates ways of engaging families with fuel poverty assistance, and the role that can be played by Children's Centres. The study, by the Association for the Conservation of Energy and The Children's Society finds that these centres can make an important contribution to engaging fuel poor families, especially if schemes are sustainably funded and long-term. Policy can ensure the potential of these centres to help fuel poor families is fulfilled. This research was grant-funded by Eaga Charitable Trust.

The recent Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) consultation on a fuel poverty strategy notes that families with children make up over 45% of households in fuel poverty and suggests a need to "*direct assistance more towards low income families with children*". The key forms of assistance available to fuel poor families are:

- The Affordable Warmth and Carbon Saving Community elements of the Energy Company Obligation
- The Broader Group element of the Warm Home Discount (WHD)
- Local schemes for assistance or advice

However, many families are not getting the help they need. One issue is that the eligibility criteria may not include families. Equally, families may miss out on automatic enrolment, as in the case of the Warm Home Discount. Other barriers include time, cost, hassle, stigma and negative perceptions of the help offered.

The **Reaching Fuel Poor Families** project investigated effective ways of engaging families with fuel poverty assistance, and focused

Families in fuel poverty: Key facts

- There are an estimated 2.23 million children, in 1.08 million families, in fuel poverty in England¹
- Only around 2.9% of national energy assistance budgets reaches fuel poor families²
- Community-based approaches using trusted intermediaries have been shown to be an effective way to engage fuel poor households
- There are around 3,116 Children's Centres in England
- Our new research shows an estimated 77% of fuel poor families live within one mile of a Children's Centre

particularly on the current and potential role of Sure Start Children's Centres.

The research identified many strengths of Children's Centres in the delivery of fuel poverty advice and assistance. They offer a nationwide network of trusted community hubs, already used by many vulnerable families. Centres already provide a wide range of services, often including advice on money, health and family matters. This means existing staff skills can be

built upon in fuel poverty work, and also offers opportunities for cross-promotion. Using centres' services, often over long periods, means many parents have good relationships with centre staff.

There are various ways of involving Children's Centres in fuel poverty schemes, from a one-off workshop to regular drop-in advice sessions, and centre-based services can be combined with other methods, such as home visits.

Recommendations for policy

It is welcome that the recent fuel poverty strategy consultation includes a renewed focus on families with children, and it is important that the final strategy reflects this focus.

This research suggests that fuel poverty work through Children's Centres should be supported by departments including DECC, Department of Health, Department for Education, Department of Work and Pensions, Department of Communities and Local Government, and the Treasury. Specifically they should:

- Promote the sustainable use of Children's Centres (and other community based services) in existing and future fuel poverty schemes. For example, if ECO becomes a fund, some of this could be ring-fenced for projects delivered in partnership with community services. If the obligation structure remains, then there could be a quota for delivery of measures to families with children. Alternatively, obligations could be quantified in terms of people (not households) benefiting from measures.
- Ensure a role for Children's Centres (and other community hubs) is included in the design of any future area-based fuel poverty interventions.
- Ensure Children's Centres are sustainably funded to deliver fuel poverty assistance. Encourage companies to fairly recompense intermediary charities/organisations.
- Promote the role of Children's Centres in health-focussed fuel poverty programmes.

The impacts of fuel poverty on children

- Fuel poverty harms children's health. Children are almost twice as likely to have breathing problems if their family cannot afford to keep their home warm³.
- Fuel poverty harms children's mental health and emotional wellbeing⁴.
- Living in cold homes can mean children become ill more often, and so may lead to more days off school⁵.

The Department of Health already works extensively with Children's Centres, so this is a good foundation for fuel poverty work.

- Support long-term fuel poverty referral networks, and facilitate networking between health agencies; housing agencies; services for families; companies; and charities.
- Move low income families with children to the core eligibility group for the WHD, as the best way to ensure families get fuel poverty assistance is to provide this automatically.

There are also important roles for business and industry, local authorities and the Third Sector. Recommendations for these sectors and full details of the research can be found in the project reports:

www.eagacharitabletrust.org/index.php/projects/item/reaching-fuel-poor-families

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Notes

- 1 ACE Research & Energy Bill Revolution. 2014. Fuel Poverty: 2014 Update. London: ACE
- 2 Guertler P & S Royston. 2013. Factfile: Families in Fuel Poverty. London: ACE
- 3 Williams N et al. 2015. Show Some Warmth: Exposing the damaging impact of energy debt on children. London: The Children's Society
- 4 Marmot Review Team. 2011. The Health Impacts of Cold Homes and Fuel Poverty. London: Friends of the Earth
- 5 Howden-Chapman P et al. 2008. Effects of Improved Home Heating on Asthma in Community Dwelling Children: Randomised Controlled Trial. *BMJ* 337 Sep 23 1