

Generate Opportunities – Winter Warmer Project

Research Summary

People with a learning disability are increasingly encouraged to live independently in their own homes. Most people with learning disabilities rely on state benefits as their only source of income and many struggle with budgeting and find themselves in debt as they seek to manage on a low income. The cost of energy is significant in every household and finding ways to help this group of people to understand the cost of heating and lighting and how to keep the cost under control is important. It is also important to understand the obstacles they face in taking control and making decisions about this important aspect of financial management and to balance this against the need to keep warm and safe in their homes.

The Project focussed on adults with a learning disability living independently as tenants or home owners. We set out to explore their motivation for saving energy, establish the extent to which they were making decisions about heating and lighting in relation to their ability to afford the cost and their ability to understand information and change behaviour in order to reduce energy consumption. We were also interested in whether people in this group would be defined as 'fuel poor', i.e. 10% of their income spent on keeping warm.

The work was carried out by a small team of workers employed by Generate Opportunities, managed by our Community Support Manager and overseen by our Operations Director.

Method

We recruited a sample group of adults with a learning disability living independently in the London Borough of Wandsworth. We sought their consent to participate in the project

before collecting base line information on each participant, using two questionnaires that were completed over the course of at least two visits. Our starting group was 16 but over the lifetime of the project some dropped out and we worked actively with a group of 12 people.

Initial Findings

We established early in the project that taking account of benefit income and their expenditure on energy no-one could be defined as 'fuel poor'. That said, all were struggling on low incomes and all participants were motivated to engage in the project by the possibility of saving money. Some were in debt. There was very little sense that people felt in control of their energy costs and none made regular reference to bills. Most paid using a key or card system, topping up regularly with the same amounts without regard to actual use, or they paid using standing orders. Additionally, many Council tenants had no control over their heating which

was centrally controlled, with the heating cost being part of their rent.

Based on the information received, we decided to work with the individuals to raise their awareness of energy saving measures and support them to take action to reduce their energy consumption. Also, through regular visiting we wanted to assess the energy efficiency of their accommodation and support improvements. Additionally, we wanted to try to make a direct link to energy use and costs and decided to use home visits to take regular meter readings, involving the participants in this activity.

We set up a schedule of regular weekly meetings with each participant and most of this work was carried out over a 9 month period between October 2011 and July 2012.

Understanding and Learning

We used the Leeds Animation DVD – ‘Everyone Can Save Energy’¹ - in small groups and individually to establish an understanding of the purpose of the project. This was helpful in getting people to think about ways in which they could take direct action to save energy.

Building on the information in the animated film we were most successful in encouraging the following good habit:

1. Not overfilling the kettle;
2. Turning lights off;
3. Not leaving appliances on ‘stand by’;
4. Reducing the loads of washing and washing at a lower temperature.

¹ Leeds Animation Workshop: ‘Energy - Save It’, 2008.
 Funded by eaga Charitable Trust:
<http://www.eagacharitabletrust.org/index.php/projects/item/energy-save-it>

Some participants kept up good habits with regular encouragement and others responded well to notes positioned near light switches and appliances reminding them to ‘switch off’. Over time the good habits have been well established among most participants and behaviours have changed.

Living Environment

During our regular visits we checked the living environment of our participants and supported a number of energy saving improvements. These ranged from new curtains, to changing to energy saving light bulbs, buying energy efficient heaters, fixing and setting timers and thermostats on heating systems, and arranging for draught exclusion measures including double glazing.

In some cases the project worker became involved in addressing multiple issues – some specific to the project and others to the general well-being of the individual. The project worker always felt that whilst the individuals were pleased to be involved and interested in saving money, for them the issue of energy saving remained quite abstract.

Linking Energy Use to Cost Saving

Although, in their feedback all participants reported being pleased that they were saving money they also reported that they were not interested in monitoring their bills or checking their meters. So the direct link between their energy saving actions and a financial benefit was hard to establish.

We were concerned that most participants paid using cards and that this was the most expensive way of paying for their energy but none of the card users was prepared to change to another method of payment and

most continued to top up by the same amount each week even if they were building credit. In two cases where payment was by standing order we were able to change providers and lower standing orders and recover substantial credit that had built up over a period of time with their current provider.

People were fearful of change and some had had previous experience of getting into debt and felt that paying the same amount each week or month was the only way to avoid debt.

Feedback

During the period August to September 2012 our project workers completed some feedback questionnaires with our active participants and identified any unresolved issues and any on-going support that might be required. Most feedback with regard to involvement with the project was positive or very positive. Two participants declined to comment. All participants have retained information about energy saving measures and all are continuing with good habits related to use of the kettle and the switching of lights and appliances. All participants perceived that taking these measures could save them money and nine out of twelve have actually recorded significant savings. There are some unresolved issues that will require some support to individuals to resolve and time will be allocated for this.

These are:

- Purchase of new curtains for 2 participants;
- Contact with landlord for repairs and installation of double glazing for 3 participants;
- Contact with their occupational therapist regarding the installation of a shower for 1 participant;

- Reclaiming credit of £180 from energy provider for one participant.

We are leaving each participant with a 'Top Tips' information sheet and a wall thermometer showing if the room is too hot or too cold to encourage the regulation of heating.

Conclusions

People with a learning disability find it hard to relate their use of energy to the bills they are paying. They tend to ensure that they are warm often creating over warm environments using additional heating and heating unused rooms without consideration of the eventual costs. They do not understand bills and statements.

People with a learning disability who pay by standing order are vulnerable to automatic rate increases and to building significant credit with energy providers.

People with a learning disability understand that they must pay for energy (gas and electricity) but do not understand choices available to them with regard to payment methods and different tariffs. They are considerably disadvantaged by not being able to avail themselves of best rates and most cost effective payment methods.

There are strong indicators that people with a learning disability take responsibility for the payment of their bills by establishing a set routine of paying the same amount at regular intervals, regardless of the amount of energy used.

People with a learning disability respond positively to awareness raising about energy saving strategies and will change habits that enable them to use less energy. They are highly motivated to save money probably due

to their low incomes. There is considerable scope to make a significant impact where motivation is so high, the messages are relatively simple to understand and many strategies are easy to implement.

People with a learning disability tend to need considerable support to improve the energy efficiency of their homes: support to buy curtains, buy and fit energy saving bulbs, and support to negotiate with landlords for repairs and improvements.

People with a learning disability have complex needs and these issues have to be tackled in the context of each individual's current set of circumstances.

Recommendations

- Organisations and individuals supporting people with a learning disability should support learning about energy efficiency and enable people to save money.
- Organisations working with people with a learning disability and supporting their budgeting should periodically review standing orders to energy companies.
- Organisations working with people with a learning disability should pay attention to their home environment and ensure they are supported to improve the energy efficiency of their homes.
- Energy Suppliers should consider tariffs and payment methods that are suitable for this group. Regular card payments seem to work well but should not carry the disadvantage of a higher rate

- Landlords should give priority to improvements and repairs for this vulnerable group

For more information

<http://www.eagacharitabletrust.org/index.php/projects>

and

Contact: Generate Opportunities, 73
Summerstown, Tooting, London SW17 0BQ
enquiries@generate-uk.org

January 2013