

Our Warm Community

Project Summary

Tackling fuel poverty in social housing using a community approach

‘Community action’ is seen by some as the panacea of social and environmental behaviour change. Our aim was to support small housing associations in implementing fuel poverty projects and report on the opportunities this may offer. What we found is that most just aren’t ready!

Our Warm Community (OWC) offered an innovative method of overcoming a number of perceived barriers in improving the energy efficiency in homes and the incidence of fuel poverty in the social housing sector.



The study was conducted by Julie Robinson and Emma Jones (of Blooming Green Ltd and Impetus Consulting Ltd respectively), with their combined experience in supporting energy efficiency and fuel poverty projects and in researching community based delivery methods.

Aims and objectives

The purpose of the project was to test the approach with a number of registered social landlords, learning what works and what doesn't. That learning was then to be promoted to other social landlords, providing a good practice method that overcame a number of barriers to tackling fuel poverty in social housing.

The project aimed to work with small housing associations enabling them to combine a suite of solutions into one holistic approach:

- Tenant involvement in design, to get buy-in from the community from the outset;
- Offering residents in a small geographical community a menu of energy efficiency measures, from which they could select their own improvements, to give residents control over their own homes;
- A makeover style offering, to generate desire and neighbourhood competitiveness for measures to be installed;
- A community event day to get residents talking and engaging; and
- Partnership with local agencies to offer a range of solutions for debt management, fuel poverty related health issues and maximising income.

Method

An action pack was developed as a step-by-step guide to preparing the RSL, designing a bespoke project and engaging with residents, through to developing partnerships and delivering the project. This guidance is also available as 36 individual factsheets.



This can be accessed via a dedicated website at www.ourwarmcommunity.org.uk, which will host the resources and case studies until 2013, as well as host other functions, such as a forum and access to the project consultants for one-to-one support in implementing a community project.

The guidance was piloted through our work with six social landlord organisations and a survey was conducted to evaluate the project and the opportunity to tackle fuel poverty within small housing associations. This support included the training of frontline housing staff and the development of action plans.

We also used this opportunity to survey social landlords on recent policy announcements and emerging opportunities.

Research on attitudes and opportunity

Small housing associations (those with less than 1,000 units) often do not have one person responsible for energy efficiency or fuel poverty issues. This means it is up to the individuals within that organisation to be interested in, understand and drive forward any initiatives. These vary from administration officers, to trustee clerks, through to chief executives. This makes it difficult for support organisations to reach the right person to offer that support.

The primary reason given for fuel poverty (after low incomes and cost of energy) was the lack of energy efficiency in homes, poor heating systems and lack of resident education in saving energy, all of which can be facilitated by a landlord. In small organisations, there was also some indication that attitudes still exist that lay the responsibility for fuel poverty at the door of the resident.

The level of current activity to tackle these issues was also markedly different between large and small organisations. All of the large organisations that responded were undertaking some form of initiative to solve the problems. Only 40% of small organisations reported to be doing so. Reasons given included a lack of knowledge, including not knowing how energy efficient their homes were, wanting to improve but being prevented through specific barriers (such as the difficulty of treating property in conservation areas) or that their stock met the Decent Homes standard and they considered this sufficient.

It is important to note that this 40% is probably an optimistic figure. The sample was self-selecting, with only those responding who had some interest and/or knowledge in the issue. It is not possible to ascertain from this survey the number of small housing associations that

have less knowledge or interest than those willing to respond.

To gain an understanding of current stock condition, we asked respondents what impact a minimum standard of E rating and above would have on their stock if it were to be mandated in the same way as it will be in the private rented sector. (This legislation means that F and G privately rented properties will be 'unrentable' from 2018 onwards.)

Over 20%, including large organisations, reported that more than half of their stock is rated F or G. A further third had no organisational information that identified this risk. Within our sample, a conservative estimate is that 13% of the stock is rated below E. (This does not include the third that could not be rated and was calculated using the lowest levels within each range. This is therefore considered to be a minimum level.)

With no minimum standard being introduced for the social housing sector, whether through a Decent Homes Plus mechanism or through the EPC rating, many social housing tenants could be at a disadvantage to those in private housing.



Large organisations need tangible support in the form of funding, training and additional staff resources. However, small organisations are seeking knowledge over and above funding to

improve the lives of their residents. Again, this is from those that have an awareness of the issue. It is suspected that many smaller housing organisations are not aware of the issues nor how they are in a good position to be part of the solution.

We asked the group about funding and the opportunity of the Government's flagship programme for improving energy efficiency, Green Deal. Nearly 60% of those in large organisations were open to the opportunity of Green Deal. However, only 20% of those in small housing associations considered that this would enable them to improve energy efficiency. 67% of smaller HAs reported that they currently self-finance any improvements and funding is not a prime barrier. It is likely that there is a lower level of awareness of the Green Deal concept amongst smaller housing associations but as funding is not considered a major barrier, a funding mechanism is unlikely to provide the solution.

Key findings

This project has highlighted that small housing associations are significantly behind their larger counterparts in their awareness, knowledge and understanding of the fuel poverty issue, as well as the solutions available to them and the benefits of tackling it.

They desperately need some hand holding if they are to provide their tenants with the energy efficiency measures and advice they need to avoid being in fuel poverty. Whilst the 'Our Warm Community' plugs a gap in the provision of information, most small housing associations need some more focused support to get a fuel poverty alleviation programme underway.

The project has been successful in motivating and enabling some social landlord

organisations in tackling energy efficiency and fuel poverty by providing the catalyst to instigating and focusing projects, but only where there is an existing desire to do so and an existing champion to take it forward.

The resources proved useful for larger housing associations to support existing initiatives, with specific training and knowledge documents being those most downloaded and used.

The concept of combining measures and education in a holistic approach proved too intimidating for small housing associations, as they have insufficient knowledge and awareness to implement themselves. It was considered too complex to implement in large organisations, particularly when instigated from an external source.

Smaller housing associations reported that knowledge was the main barrier to initiating energy efficiency and fuel poverty, over and above that of funding issues.

Recommendations

Support network: There is a need for a proactive network of small organisations that actively raises awareness, encourages and enables the sharing of information.

Mentoring: Further research is required to investigate the opportunities and barriers to developing a mentoring programme between large and small RSLs.

Support organisations: Support bodies should seek to provide better access for smaller housing associations to their events and projects, through providing regional and tailored support.

Research: We recommend that further research is undertaken to understand the

barriers and opportunities that are present for residents of smaller housing associations.

This should include the opportunities and barriers to the uptake of Green Deal by tenants of smaller housing associations and access to ECO, as well as the potential for smaller housing associations to become proactively involved in Green Deal delivery.

This is critical to ensure that some residents are not disadvantaged because of the size of their landlord organisation.

Policy recommendations:

1. Government should set a minimum standard for energy efficiency in the social housing sector. Landlords will then have a clear understanding of the level of energy efficiency required and driven to implement it.
2. Social housing tenants must have equitable access to an allocated affordable warmth element of the new obligation (ECO), particularly because they are bill payers and will therefore be contributing to this fund.
3. Green Deal providers should be encouraged to work with smaller housing associations.
4. Smaller housing associations must have a mechanism through which to connect with Green Deal providers, perhaps through the proposed Green Deal Advice Centre.

For more information

The full report can be downloaded from the eaga Charitable Trust website, www.eagacharitabletrust.org

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