Reaching fuel poor families through Children’s Centres
A guide to inform scheme design and delivery
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1 Families in fuel poverty: Understanding the issue

With an estimated 2.23 million children living in fuel poverty in England, delivering assistance to fuel poor families is a key concern for many Local Authorities and service-providers. At present, 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. Community-based approaches using trusted intermediaries have been shown to be an effective way to engage fuel poor households.

The Reaching Fuel Poor Families project investigated ways of engaging families with fuel poverty assistance, and the role that can be played by Children’s Centres. There are around 3,116 Sure Start Children’s Centres in England. The research found that these centres can make an important contribution to engaging fuel poor families and helping them take up the assistance available, especially if schemes are sustainably funded and long-term.

Families in fuel poverty: Key facts
- There are an estimated 2.23 million children, in 1.08 million families, in fuel poverty in England
- Only around 2.9% of national energy assistance budgets reaches fuel poor families
- Our new research shows an estimated 77% of fuel poor families live within one mile of a Children’s Centre.

What assistance is available to fuel poor families?
The key forms of assistance available to fuel poor families nationwide are:

Energy Company Obligation (ECO)
The large energy suppliers are obligated to provide energy efficiency improvements to households. Under the Affordable Warmth obligation, aimed at reducing fuel poverty, they must provide heating and insulation measures to vulnerable consumers (defined using receipt of certain benefits). Under the Carbon Saving Community Obligation they must provide measures to homes in areas of low income according to the Index of Multiple Deprivation.

Warm Home Discount (WHD)
This is a payment made each year to eligible customers (replacing previous social tariffs offered by energy companies). The Warm Home Discount provides a payment of £140 towards energy bills for low income, vulnerable households. Large energy companies are required to provide this payment. Customers are eligible for the Warm Home Discount if they are:
- In the Core Group of low income pensioners
- In the Broader Group of eligible claimants from vulnerable households. Eligibility for this Broader Group is (within limits) at the discretion of their energy supplier.

The Core Group for the Warm Home Discount has the money credited automatically to their bill. The Broader Group need to apply to their supplier. In these cases, even if they are eligible, the energy company is not obliged to provide the discount in every case, since the amount of support available is limited. Recent
research by The Children’s Society\textsuperscript{3} found that in all cases, the Broader Group includes some families with children. However, different suppliers include different groups of families with children.

2 Children’s Centres and fuel poverty work

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

There are many reasons why those designing schemes for fuel poor families should consider involving Children’s Centres. These include the following:

- 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
- Sessions at centres are generally less resource intensive than home visits

How can Children’s Centres be involved in work with fuel poor families?

Types of support for fuel poor families

First, it is important to note that support can come in a range of forms, including information and advice, assistance and skills development.

Information and advice

Information refers to facts and practical tips that may help families in fuel poverty, but are not tailored to an individual case. Advice refers to practical suggestions that are specific to an individual’s circumstances and address their concerns. Schemes working with or through Children’s Centres can offer information and advice on:

- Managing energy debt
- Comparing tariffs and switching suppliers
- Different payment methods (including pre-payment meters and paperless bills)
- Dealing with broken appliances or building problems, and repairs
- Energy efficiency measures such as boilers
- Grants and financial assistance available, including for energy efficiency measures
- Maximising income in general

Assistance

This refers to active and practical help in addressing an individual’s concerns. Key forms of practical assistance around fuel poverty include:

- Applying for grants and financial assistance
- Comparing tariffs and changing suppliers
- Switching from (or to, in some cases) a pre-payment meter
- Negotiating with companies over debts and payment plans
- Assessing incoming and outgoings to ensure energy costs are manageable
- Arranging repairs, home audits and installations of measures
- Maximising income, especially through assistance with welfare benefits

**Skills development**
This refers to training in how to do relevant activities independently in future. Skills development might cover:
- Saving energy at home, including in specific activities such as cooking or heating
- Understanding energy bills
- Switching supplier
- Managing energy debt
- Wider financial literacy skills

Many schemes offer a mixture of forms of support. Information is the easiest form of support to deliver, with low demands on time and resources. However, it may be least effective, especially for vulnerable families, who may have many other demands on their attention. Assistance and skills development are the most intensive and time-consuming forms of support.

**Roles for a Children’s Centre**
There are a variety of possible roles for a Children’s Centre in a fuel poverty scheme. These include:
- Centre as a site for publicity materials or written information on energy/fuel poverty issues
- Centre newsletter and other communications as channels for publicity or information
- Centre as a venue for one-off scheme event run by (or in partnership with) an external organisation
- Centre as a venue for regular scheme sessions run by (or in partnership with) an external organisation
- Centre as part of a referral network, with staff referring clients to external organisations
- Centre employs scheme staff and runs regular scheme sessions

Approaches that can be instead of, or alongside, a Children’s Centre role include:
- Advice provided on a website
- Telephone advice service that people can call
- Leaflets and written communications delivered to homes
- Street stalls and presence at local events
- Phone calls and texts to engage and inform people
- Knocking on doors to engage and inform people
- Pre-arranged visits to homes by advisors
- Referrals from professionals such as nurses or social workers
It can be good to combine different approaches; e.g. a Children’s Centre event followed by a home visit, or a combination of appointments and workshops.

3 Designing a scheme

What should be considered in the design and structure of a scheme?
The following issues are important things to consider when planning a fuel poverty scheme involving a Children’s Centre.

- 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 centre events, 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 types of sessions can be offered?
Various kinds of sessions can be held at Children’s Centres. These sessions come in three main forms: running group workshops, using existing centre events, and holding one-to-one advice sessions.

Group workshops
Group sessions can be very busy, noisy or chaotic, especially if there are children present. The ideal solution is to provide childcare, though funding for this may be an issue. Another option is to offer children’s activities alongside the session (such as making draught snakes). Advice surgeries are best when there is a single point of intervention such as focussing on the Warm Home Discount, rather than wide-ranging advice. A limitation of these events is that it can sometimes be hard to discuss quite confidential subjects in a busy centre. However there are a number of ways to get around this, such as offering one-to-one sessions in addition, for clients who prefer this. An informal, fun and friendly atmosphere can help make workshops a success. But attendance at one-off workshops may be poor, and repeated events more effective.
Existing sessions
A key concern is that vulnerable families may not attend special events devoted to energy issues, and one solution is to attend sessions that they already participate in. These could include parent-and-toddler groups and stay-and-play sessions, or other activities offered by Children’s Centres. This approach has the advantage of taking account of children’s needs and care, without the cost of a specially-run crèche. It can also give parents one-to-one attention – though this will obviously consume more time than a group workshop would. Another limitation is that this depends very much on the timetable and spaces provided by the centre – groups may close throughout school holidays, and a given centre may run few suitable sessions (as there are some sessions where such a disruption would not be appropriate).

One-to-one advice sessions
In some cases it may be more effective to deliver advice on a one-to-one basis rather than try to talk to a whole group. One-to-one sessions also mean that on-the-spot assistance can be given, for example, in comparing tariffs or calling an energy company. This kind of session can be delivered through an appointment system, or alternatively, as a drop-in (in some cases a ticketing system may be required).

Whichever type of event is used, it is notable that regular events are generally more effective than one-off events. At one-off surgery-type events, low turnout is often a problem. Regular events allow time for awareness to grow and spread, and can be publicised with a regular advertisement. If people miss one they can come to another, and because they know about the event in advance, they can bring documents such as energy bills. More fundamentally, sustained work in one community over time allows for the development of trust and local connections.

What are effective routes to engagement?
The following engagement techniques have been found to be effective in past schemes using Children’s Centres.

- Face-to-face contact in a place and time 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.
- Long-term schemes to build awareness and trust
- 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)
- Avoiding stigma by not using the term ‘fuel poverty’, or providing generalist advice sessions, so that only the advisor knows the topic

What are key attributes for an advisor?
The quality of advice is central to an effective scheme. The following advisor attributes are important:

- Appropriate training in provision of high-quality advice
- Good knowledge of energy issues, especially those most affecting their client base (training provided by National Energy Action may be useful – see www.nea.org.uk/training)
What limitations should scheme designers be aware of?

Scheme designers should be aware of these limitations:

- 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.
- Success largely depends on staff enthusiasm, expertise and capacity.
- 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.
- Provision for children during sessions needs to be taken into account.
- There is a risk that vulnerable people may come to depend on the assistance and advice, unless efforts are made to empower them and develop their skills.

4 Working with partners

Schemes can be led by a Children’s Centre, or run by other organisations in partnership with a centre – for example, a Citizen’s Advice Bureau, environmental charity or housing association. This section looks at how some different organisations can help support these schemes.

How can local authorities help?

Local authorities should aim to promote and support fuel poverty work through Children’s Centres, and consider this in the design of any policies, programmes and funding streams. More specifically:

- 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.
- They can facilitate networking and partnerships between local organisations such as Children’s Centres, health agencies, charities and other service providers for the purposes of promoting fuel poverty assistance.
- They can help to raise awareness of existing schemes for fuel poor families, for example, through the LA website and publications.
- They can 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.
How can business and industry help?
Companies involved in the energy industry, especially those with obligations to assist vulnerable customers, should aim to promote and support fuel poverty work through Children's Centres. This can be done as part of obligation schemes, or as part of wider corporate social responsibility. Specifically, they can:

- 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.

How can third sector organisations help?
Third sector organisations should aim to promote and support fuel poverty work through Children's Centres, and consider this in the design of any policies and programmes. This can apply to those directly involved in running Children’s Centres, but also those involved in work on energy issues. Specifically:

- 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, to build a resource base.
- Partnerships between different third sector organisations can be valuable on the national scale, and can also facilitate local partnerships. For example, organisations like Citizens' Advice could form partnerships with nationwide children's charities, which could form the basis of local joint projects.
- Children's charities can also help by providing training and information resources to centre staff to support fuel poverty work, and publicising this work through their various communication channels.
- 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).

Third sector organisations may choose to campaign, lobby or advocate on behalf of fuel poor families, and influence future policy. Within this, they can highlight the very serious impacts of fuel poverty on families and children, and the need for targeted assistance to address these. They can also demonstrate the role that could be played by Children's Centres, and encourage policy support for this.

An example of a successful partnership approach is the Monergy workshop project, run by the Footprint Trust: [http://www.footprint-trust.co.uk](http://www.footprint-trust.co.uk)
5  Key sources of information

Energy Saving Trust
For tips on saving energy at home
www.energysavingtrust.org.uk

Ofgem’s Energy Shopping Guide
For the official guide to switching energy supplier
www.goenergyshopping.co.uk

USwitch
For comparing energy tariffs and switching supplier
www.uswitch.com

Citizens Advice
For information and advice on welfare benefits, debt and money management, and many more issues. Use the advice website
www.adviceguide.org.uk or get in touch with your local bureau.

Government Warm Home Discount webpages
For details of the Warm Home Discount, including some information on eligibility and how to apply
www.gov.uk/the-warm-home-discount-scheme

Government ECO webpage
For details of the ECO, including some information on eligibility
https://www.gov.uk/energy-company-obligation

Energy Saving Advice Service
Official telephone advice service regarding energy saving and the assistance available
0300 123 1234

Energy suppliers
To find out more about eligibility for the Warm Home Discount and for ECO measures, contact the relevant energy supplier directly.

6  About the Reaching Fuel Poor Families project

The Reaching Fuel Poor Families project was grant-funded by Eaga Charitable Trust and carried out by The Association for the Conservation of Energy and The Children’s Society during summer 2014. The research drew on a review of 25 schemes across England that involve Children’s Centres in fuel poverty work, and an in-depth evaluation of one scheme at Mortimer House Children’s Centre in Bradford.

Full details of the research can be found in the project reports:

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Notes
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