



Department  
of Energy &  
Climate Change



*Campaigning for Warm Homes*

# Warm Homes for Older People

The role of social networks



Age Action Alliance

March 2013

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This report presents the results from a second phase of research undertaken as part of a wider programme of activity aligned to the activities and objectives of the Age Action Alliance (AAA). This wider project aimed to examine and identify the ways by which older people can be engaged and supported to take advantage of new energy efficiency and fuel poverty programmes and how service providers already supporting older people can also be supported to help achieve this.

Previous obligations upon energy suppliers to deliver carbon savings through domestic energy efficiency programmes, such as Carbon Emissions Reduction Target (CERT) and Community Energy Saving programme (CESP), and the government's national fuel poverty programme in England, Warm Front, were replaced in 2013 by the Green Deal and Energy Saving Obligation (ECO). Both of these programmes were introduced to address the twin challenges of reducing carbon emissions and fuel poverty with the former adopting a market-based mechanism allowing households to invest in energy efficiency measures at no upfront cost; the cost of which is repaid through energy savings over several years. The latter programme ECO, complements the Green Deal, and primarily comprises two targets. The first to reduce carbon emissions in hard to treat properties and the second, an 'affordable warmth' target aimed at improving the energy efficiency standards of properties occupied by fuel-poor households. This element of ECO acknowledges that the Green Deal is not suitable for vulnerable and low-income households, many of whom will be under-heating their home and so less able to make energy savings from which to repay their Green Deal charge. Unlike Warm Front which was funded directly by the Exchequer, ECO is entirely funded by energy suppliers via a levy on electricity bills.

It is in this context that the wider AAA project and this research were undertaken. Phase one of the research, which analysed the attitudes and experience of older households in relation to energy efficiency and assessed their views on the Green Deal and ECO, also suggested that more research was needed. One area of further research identified was the need to better understand how older people's existing social networks could be harnessed by the Green Deal and ECO to more effectively engage and support older and vulnerable households to ensure they are able to access and benefit from these new programmes. It was these questions that this research aimed to address, as well as what support organisations that form older people's social networks would need to help them fulfil this role.

Research was undertaken between November 2012 and March 2013, predominantly in the North East of England. A mixed-methods approach was adopted comprising three elements: survey of older people (aged 55 or over) by questionnaire, telephone interviews with older households and interviews with frontline agencies. The research involved almost 200 older people and nine representatives from a range of frontline agencies that form parts of older people's social networks.

## **Key findings**

While it is recognised that older people are not a homogenous group with broad and varied ranges of abilities and characteristics, households that took part in this research reflected to a large extent the research's target group of older and more vulnerable households: older age; a high proportion of single person households; presence of illness and disability; and some households with low incomes. In addition, rural households made up a good proportion (27%) of those surveyed.

In terms of income respondents were largely found to have low to medium incomes on average and a substantial number with a weekly income at or below the poverty threshold (60% median). Responses revealed how a limited income can impact on the social connectedness of older people, thus narrowing the range of communication channels they are exposed to.

Satisfaction with aspects of their existing heating system and how well the house retains heat was fairly high across the sample. Results however suggest that a wider focus on home heating, including aspects other than technical elements of home heating (heating system focussed) can reveal more about older people's experiences of affordability and the consequences of unaffordable energy bills, e.g. rationing of heating or other essentials. Indeed, respondents that agreed that they sometimes under-heated their home, rationed other essentials in order to pay for energy and who worried about affording their fuel were statistically more likely to be less satisfied with their heating system and home insulation than those who did not agree.

Under-heating and compromising on thermal comfort was common among research participants and while for most paying for energy did not mean sometimes buying less, or not at all, of other essentials (such as food) this was the case for more than one in four households. Worry associated with not being able to afford energy bills, while not the case for the vast majority of respondents, was fairly common among the sample. Indeed, energy bills were second to only health and wellbeing as a source of concern and worry among the sample. Despite this, the majority (82.5%) of households said that they could normally keep their home comfortably warm during winter. For those that could not, cost was the primary reason given and for a substantial number (45%) the reason was both financial and due to poor insulation standards and/or an inadequate heating system.

While the health and wellbeing of the respondent or another member of the household appears to be the issue of greatest concern or worry among a small majority of households surveyed, energy bills were a source of worry for around half. Results also suggest that for many older people, household finances as well as the upkeep and maintenance of the home are a considerable source of concern; more so than loneliness, getting out and about, personal care and housing.

### *Social networks*

Older people's social networks and contacts are broad and varied but fall into five main groupings: family and neighbours; social/leisure; health and social care; community, including statutory; and digital. Each can be further categorised as being formal - with some statutory or official status, or informal - more casual and/or unofficial or community-based.

Results suggest that older households are more likely to have a more confined social circle than their younger counterparts, engaging less in social activities and spending more time at home. As emphasised in the literature reviewed, informal and 'loose' networks, including friends, family and neighbours, are of great importance. This is supported by this research which found these networks and contacts represented by far the most frequent contacts of the older people involved. For a small minority however, contact with family, friends and neighbours can be very infrequent, if at all. Neither age nor whether the household was a single person household appeared to influence how frequently households saw their neighbours and friends. Age, however, did appear to influence how often households had contact with family, although this was limited. Older respondents, aged 75 or over, were found to be slightly more likely to have contact with their family on a daily or weekly basis compared to respondents aged under 75.

Social networks beyond family, neighbours and friends are engaged much less frequently, and for many were limited. Around a fifth to a third of respondents however, engaged fairly frequently with a broader range of social networks and contacts, and social and leisure groups were found to be most frequently engaged with after family, friends and neighbours, but tended to be informal rather than formal. Activities included lunch clubs, coffee mornings, and hobby and exercise groups and where engaged, activities were usually weekly or monthly.

Hobby and exercise groups were more frequently engaged by younger respondents, aged under 75 years, yet older respondents (aged 75 or over) were found to be twice as likely as younger respondents to attend a coffee morning or lunch club on a regular basis. In addition, they were more likely to attend bingo regularly despite few respondents engaging in this activity on a regular basis generally.

Frequency of contact with community groups was similar to contact with social and leisure groups and tended to be more informal than formal (including voluntary or charity work, community/parish halls and faith or religious groups) rather than contact with statutory agencies such as the local authority and housing providers. Older respondents were found to engage to with work or volunteering colleagues much less often than those aged under 75 years but more likely to have regular (daily or weekly) contact with their housing provider.

While contact with health and social care services appeared to be less frequent than those networks discussed above, results do reveal that contact among those that used home help or a home carer was fairly regular (daily or weekly). It was also found that the most regular contact (daily or weekly) with this type of network was among older respondents (aged 75 or over) and single person households. This finding supports previous research by Fee et al (1999) that found that some of the oldest, frailest people have contact only with their home carers and research by Katz (2011) particularly highlighted the close relationships with paid carers and support staff.

Results suggest that while most social networks engaged most often by older people are informal it is older, and perhaps those that live alone, that are more likely to have the most regular contact with networks that can be considered more formal, e.g. social care services such as meal at home.

Engagement with informal, but perhaps more support oriented activities, such as lunch clubs and coffee morning were also more popular among older respondents.

### *Harnessing social networks*

The findings presented in this report are intended to help inform and shape the ways in which existing routes for advice can be usefully harnessed and which social networks have the greatest potential to deliver Green Deal and ECO advice. With regard to seeking advice on matters relating to home heating and warmth the majority of respondents were either very confident or a little confident about where to go or whom to ask. Confidence was lowest however, for where to go for advice on information about, or how to apply for, assistance through energy efficiency schemes.

Respondents who were least confident about from where to seek advice and support on home energy and warmth were also more likely to report under-heating their home in order to avoid a high energy bill. This result is clearly of importance in the context of the roll out of Green Deal, and more so ECO, given that their ultimate success is dependent on take-up. The way in which ECO is funded, via levy on energy bills, makes it even more vital that vulnerable and fuel-poor households, for whom the Green Deal is not suitable because of the reduced ability to make energy savings due to under-heating, are made aware and have access to the assistance available to them.

Awareness and knowledge of both Green Deal and ECO was fairly low, 60% and 69.2% respectively knew nothing about these schemes, nor did they recognise the schemes by name. Awareness of the Green Deal however was higher than for ECO. Warm Front however, and perhaps expectedly, achieved much higher levels of recognition and knowledge with fewer than one in three (31.5%) stating they had not heard of Warm Front and knew nothing about the scheme.

Recognition and knowledge of energy suppliers' Priority Service Register was also fairly low with fewer than one in three (31.6%) having heard of it, but recognition levels were slightly higher for the Warm Home Discount Scheme than for the Priority Service Register, Green Deal and ECO. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the vast majority (92.6%) of respondents had heard of the Winter Fuel Payment and/or Cold Weather Payment and knowledge of some of the detail of these schemes was also very high.

This research suggests that social networks could be usefully harnessed to help reach older and vulnerable households, overcoming barriers such as trust, isolation, illness or disability and communication barriers, as well providing additional support where it is required to maximise the take-up of energy efficiency and fuel poverty assistance.

Family and friends consistently ranked very highly as preferred sources of advice and support on many issues, including energy. They were often perceived as a trusted point of referral and a first contact for advice. In some cases however, older people were reluctant to 'bother' their family, often perceiving them to have busy lives, and so would try to avoid contacting them for help and look elsewhere in the first instance, perhaps friends or other networks. Often these informal family and friends networks are an opportunity to share knowledge and experiences with the expectation

being that while advice or a service may not be provided directly, they would be advised about from whom they should seek advice or support from.

Community-based and voluntary sector organisations also consistently ranked highly, often second to only family and friends as a preferred source of advice on energy and non-energy related matters. Responses indicate that this can largely be attributed to high levels of trust and perception of independence and of understanding the needs of the service user.

Local authorities and statutory bodies were perceived as giving legitimacy and alongside the media and internet consistently ranked in preferred sources of advice on non-energy related issues and general advice relating to managing energy bills, using and saving energy and keeping warm at home, but generally to a much lesser degree than family and friends and community-based or voluntary sector organisations. Statutory, central and local government however ranked much more highly when advice was sought relating to energy efficiency and fuel poverty schemes specifically. While open-ended responses did not reveal in detail the reasons behind this, several references to the Department for Work Pensions indicate that this might be related to the benefit-based eligibility for schemes.

Internet sources of advice and support were much more likely to be specified as a preferred source by respondents that had completed their questionnaire online. While not all respondents that completed a paper-based questionnaire rejected online sources they were much less likely to prefer such sources. Given the association between social and digital exclusion, working with existing social networks to reach the most vulnerable households will be essential. In addition, careful consideration of the most appropriate routes for advice on Green Deal and ECO will be required, with all information that is available online being made available to households via other routes.

Mistrust of energy suppliers appears to be associated with the price of energy and their position as profit driven organisations. There is some evidence that households can be sceptical that energy suppliers will offer advice about energy saving when to the consumer this seems contrary to suppliers' interests. Nevertheless, when it comes to advice about energy, energy suppliers are viewed as 'experts' and as such ranked highly as a preferred source of advice and information on energy efficiency schemes. As such, this might suggest that advice and communications from energy suppliers regarding the Green deal and ECO should emphasise their role as 'experts' while addressing some of the doubts and concerns of consumers relating to motivations.

- Overall, the most preferred sources of advice and support relating specifically to energy efficiency schemes appears to be a combination of unstructured (e.g. family and friends) and structured (e.g. community-based and charitable organisations) informal networks and formal networks, including energy suppliers and local and central government. While respondents were able to specify their preferred sources of advice on energy efficiency schemes when prompted, the most common unprompted response was 'do not know'. Given the relatively low levels of awareness of new energy efficiency programmes (Green Deal and ECO), this is perhaps unsurprising.

- Working with both informal and formal networks of older people could potentially yield significant benefits for new energy efficiency programmes in terms of meaningfully reaching and communicating with some of the most vulnerable households. As has been discussed, family and friends and community-based organisations are highly valued and trusted and are potentially important gatekeepers with whom energy efficiency schemes should work in order to effectively diffuse information on the Green Deal and ECO. Research by Ritters and Davis (2008) has demonstrated how this can be effectively achieved in their examination of the LinkAge Plus programme which worked through services already offered by local organisations and met the needs of older people in a tailored and flexible way.
- This research suggests that organisations that currently provide services to older people already do, or can, provide support to energy efficiency schemes in two ways: signposting to advice and support and general provision of information on available energy efficiency schemes, and secondly, more detailed advice services that include advocacy, outreach and help with applications or help overcoming multiple and complex problems that often act as barriers to the take-up of assistance.
- There exists a great deal of potential for Green Deal and ECO advice (to varying degrees) to be incorporated or 'bolted-on' to existing services; indeed energy-related advice already forms part of many existing services provided by the frontline organisations interviewed. Because of the existing and trusted relationships already established with services users, frontline organisations are able to reach and engage with some of the most vulnerable households and importantly, they already recognise the importance of energy efficiency and fuel poverty as a key area of concern for their service users.
- There does exist however, some challenges to frontline organisations in accommodating advice and support on energy efficiency programmes, including funding, capacity and alignment of objectives to avoid conflicting priorities. Funding challenges are faced not only by community-based organisations, but across sectors, and could impact on services' ability to assist with Green Deal and ECO-related advice services to the fullest extent of their ability.
- Results suggest that to overcome some of these challenges, time is set aside to work with the service providers to discuss and agree ways energy efficiency advice and support services could be incorporated without negatively impacting or conflicting with their core service and that there is capacity to deliver within current funding restrictions.





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