

Call for evidence by the Energy Bill Committee. June 2011

KWILLT Research Team

This response to the call for evidence is based on a study funded through the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Research for Patient Benefit Programme, the Keeping Warm in Later Life project (KWILLT). This response presents independent research commissioned by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) under its Research for Patient Benefit (RfPB) Programme (Grant Reference Number PB-PG-0408-16041). The views expressed are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the NHS, the NIHR or the Department of Health. The study is a partnership involving the host organisation, NHS Rotherham along with Sheffield Hallam University, National Energy Action, Age UK Rotherham, Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council and older people's action and community groups.

KWILLT: Project Aim

This research study aims to examine the knowledge, beliefs and values of older people regarding keeping warm at home, and identify the barriers they experience that prevent them accessing help in keeping warm. This information will be used to develop social marketing 'keeping warm' interventions, including brief intervention training materials for health and social care staff, assessment referral tools and social marketing public campaign insight.

KWILLT: Methods

Different methods are being used to capture the views of older people and professionals to ensure that we obtain an accurate understanding of factors that influence older people keeping warm.

1. Individual interviews and room temperature measurement with 50 older people and interviews with 25 health and social care professionals to explore the knowledge, beliefs and values of older people regarding keeping warm at home. Data was collection from older people in the winter months of 2009/2010 and 2010/2011. Staff interviews were completed in the summer of 2010.
2. 6 focus groups with older people, health and social care professionals and people in a policy or strategic capacity. These focus groups will verify, challenge and expand upon findings from the individual interviews. They were conducted between February and April 2011.
3. A consultation event with up to 150 lay and professional stakeholders to examine the findings and shape the social marketing 'keeping warm' intervention. This will be held on the 19th September 2011.

Energy Bill Response

Summary

The Kwilt team have responded to this call and provided evidence from the findings to indicate how vulnerable older people may respond to the initiatives in the Energy Bill including the Green Deal and Smart Meters. We indicate how some aspects of the proposals may contribute to health inequalities experienced by vulnerable older people. Particular concerns about the Energy Bill proposals are listed below. Illustrative quotes are provided from a range of participants from both the older people and staff who were interviewed.

Evidence

1. ***The new obligation on energy companies to help certain groups of consumers who need extra support with saving energy.*** Our study indicates that this extra support is vital in order to prevent intervention generated inequalities. The intention to make information on energy bills clearer is supported by data from the project. Participants indicated that older people struggle to understand current bills, tariffs, billing and payment systems. As a result the more vulnerable are less likely to access the best tariffs. Previous interventions such as Warm Front and Social Tariffs have been difficult for vulnerable older people to access, which has adverse health consequences. In order for policy interventions to be accessible and acceptable to vulnerable older people they need to overcome the barriers identified in our study. These barriers include:

1.1. Lack of knowledge and awareness

Our participants lacked knowledge and awareness of current energy efficiency interventions available to them and how and where to access them. Participants knowledge of interventions and eligibility was often inaccurate, confusing and unavailable in some cases. This tended to deter them from trying to access more information. More is required to get accessible information to those who are currently most vulnerable and in need of help keeping warm at home, including older people.

'There should be something that can help, somewhere to go for advice. Because if you ring a certain, oh no we don't deal with that you want so and so, and you're just passed from pillar to post. And you don't really get any sensible answers'

'They definitely do not [understand] because some of them are all right, but some of them are not what they're supposed to be they're scams.'

1.2. Sources of information

The source of information can impact on the level of engagement and behaviour of the individual in terms of accessing energy efficiency interventions and on heating behaviour. Information from trusted sources such as a family member or a community group are more likely to be acted upon. However, the knowledge and awareness of the trusted source may have a negative impact on behaviour if it is poorly informed. Another concern from many participants was over reliance on the part of the energy suppliers and available schemes to put information on the internet which many were unable to access.

'She has coal because she thinks gas is expensive and she's heard that gas is running out and things and she doesn't want to get it in case it runs out and then what's she going to do.'

'Well I think I might approach Citizens Advice Bureau for example as a starting point. It could be any of these. It could be Citizens Advice Bureau, it could be, depending on what the problem was. It could be the National Health Service. It could be the local council or it could be even lobbying an MP god forbid, you know.'

'What gets my goat now is that you can go online. I haven't got a computer, I don't want a computer, I can't get online, so therefore I am barred from 90% of things because I'm not computer literate'.

'It's in their interest to try and reduce fuel consumption so this home insulation thing, they need to have somebody out there explaining more and more, particularly at older people, what benefits are of having insulation, how much it's going to cost, what help they can give you. The only help I ever get is people ringing me with unsolicited phone calls saying do you know about the grants that you can have? I don't want that because that's just somebody trying to sell me something. You know, I find it very confusing actually'.

1.3. Mindset and values

The older people in our study revealed how past experiences, as well as social and cultural influences generated certain values and mindsets. They valued thrift, privacy, stoicism, hardiness and independence, and found change hard to deal with. All of these had an impact on the readiness and ability of people to access interventions available. Past experience of coping with poor heating and low household income reinforced tendencies to put up with current hardship.

'Well, I don't know how to work that one in there. That's why I just said to him, when he set it for me, I said look I want to work it manually. I want it going off and coming on when I want to do it. So I just work from the thermostat in the hall and just come down in the morning, switch it on, and when I go up at night I switch it off. You know, so I don't know the first thing about working that boiler but I'm not bothered in a way'.

'I mean growing up there would have been ice on the inside of the bedroom windows quite regularly because it would be really, really cold in the bedrooms in winter. So, I don't know, I think you are influenced to think a little bit, in our generation I think you tend to think they're a bit nannied..... it shouldn't really be much of a hardship to be cold occasionally. But I guess you've got to be a bit more practical as you get older with that. No, I wouldn't say it's, I wouldn't see it as a life-threatening issue to have been without the heating for a month because we grew up without any so'.

'I think older people see it as a luxury. I don't think they see it has any bearing on their health. I think they think they can get by without it a lot of the time, or just very little'.

"No, I grew up in what was called and two up and two down, which was a terraced house. We had an outside loo, we had a cold water tap and a fire which did the cooking and heated a kettle.....There was a coal fire. You had a brick heated in the oven or an oven plate out of the oven, a metal plate wrapped in a blanket into the bed at night. Loads of bedding, and you wore more clothes. You wore more clothes, you had more exercise, we walked more, we didn't have cars, we didn't have central heating. A lot, I think people were much more self sufficient then, you had to be to survive. Well I wear fewer clothes, but if it gets cold I put more clothes on or wrap a fleece round me rather than turn the heating up. That is always my last resort, to turn the heating up. I was trained to be frugal, it was part of my upbringing. You didn't have a lot so you were careful with what you did have. And with the costs rising now, I'm certainly not extravagant with the heating, I'm very wary. I worry about my independence not my fuel bills. I don't want to be dependent".

1.4. Trust and fear

Underpinning all respondents reported behaviour were strong feelings of mistrust of energy companies, the government and banking. This was heightened by media coverage. There was an underlying belief that organisations and the Government were serving their own interests rather than those of the public. This influenced how people used heating in their homes as well as their willingness, ability and confidence to access energy efficiency measures and social tariffs. Experience of hard selling and door stepping has further discredited energy companies in the eyes of some. This would influence their willingness and choice regarding uptake of any scheme administered through energy providers. Fear of debt and not being able to afford fuel as prices increase forced participants into a default position of turning heating off or down.

'I think the energy companies are wrong though because what they've done is they've made people never believe them any more.'

'I think it's absolutely diabolical. The profits they're making and they're not passing anything on to the customer! I think it stinks! And I think Parliament's got a lot to answer for.'

'I think the energies are wrong though because what they've done is they've made people never believe them any more about it's costing that, they're not putting it up just for their own greed or because they can get away with it.'

'I get the feeling that, you know, as with many big multinationals, they don't care about the consumer really. They don't. They're only interested in rewarding the shareholders and keeping the share prices up if they can.'

'My friends complain that it's cold but I daren't put the heating on any more you see.'

1.5. Technology (methods of banking, fuel payment and heating)

Older people struggled with the technology required to help them keep warm at home, including heating, banking and communication technology. Difficulty with using and understanding technology, alongside mindset and values, meant people fell back on a reliance on other strategies to keep warm e.g. layering up and turning the heating off or down, using supplementary heating. They did not, and could not, access initiatives like Warm Front and social tariffs. New interventions need to address these barriers. Additionally people struggled to access and use new heating technology if it was installed because of problems with mobility, dexterity and infirmity due to their age.

'I don't think they know how to set the timers and things. A lady I went to, hers was on the stairs and she didn't have a clue. She just put the boiler on every day and that was it. And her house was quite cold because she only had it on for certain times of the day but she did have an electric heater which she plugged in which was at the side of her to keep her warm. She wasn't really bothered about the rest of the house. They keep themselves warm, they sit with blankets on. But I don't think they know how to work these new systems. I don't actually, I leave it to my husband.'

'And I don't believe in using cards because you have to remember so many numbers, and They pay with cards and things, and they're happy with it, but I'm not, so I don't do it. I never have done and I'd much rather, well besides which when you pay by direct debit you've got no receipt. You've no receipt so, and I know they keep saying all these things, and what gets my goat now is that you can go online. I haven't got a computer, I don't want a computer, I can't get online, so therefore I am barred from 90% of things because I'm not computer literate.'

'Sometimes I feel quite cold, and I don't know why that is. The radiators were altered when Warm Front came in....No, but I've never honestly, ever used it because to turn it on and all that sort of thing you've got to get right down because it's behind the [cupboard], you know. Well, I don't know how to work that one [boiler] in there. That's why I just said to him [heating engineer], when he set it for me, I said look I want to work it manually. I want it going off and coming on when I want to do it. So I just work from the thermostat in the hall and just come down in the morning, switch it on, and when I go up at night I switch it off. You know, so I don't know the first thing about working that boiler but I'm not bothered in a way. You know, the easier the better for me.'

'The hardest job for me when I go upstairs into little bedroom it's to move some drawers. I've got to move them out of way so I can open the cupboard and get down on my knees to my boiler. That's hardest job that.'

1.6. Visibility (payment methods and fuel consumption)

Older people feel that they have become invisible in the current society where decisions concerning heating technology are made without their views. Modern heating technology has taken away their independence in terms of decision making. With internet banking, they are disconnected from people, beneficial fuel payment methods and cash. Compared to solid fuel which was visible, the invisible nature of gas and electricity makes it difficult to track usage and make judgements about fuel usage. Older vulnerable people need extra help in overcoming this barrier. Some older people revert to more expensive supplementary sources of heating rather than cheaper central heating because it is more visible.

'I don't know what the bill will be with this, this time round, but everybody says it'll eat it up. But you see I don't put the gas on.'

'They'll not do direct debits a lot of them, they don't know how to do it.... even writing a cheque basically, almost impossible for a lot of older people because they don't know, they've never done it; they've always dealt in cash'

"Yeah because if you've got money in your purse you know how much money you've got to spend, and when you've spent it you've got no more..... And I'm from a cash society, we were a cash society when I was younger, and I don't want to join this one, so I'm quite happy as I am."

2. The roll-out of smart meters. Whilst good for some, the roll-out of Smart Meters may further confuse some older people who already struggle with technology related to heating. It may add to existing default responses in older people with low incomes and past experiences of poverty, thrift, frugality and stoicism. There is a risk that messages about energy consumption via smart meters will prompt older vulnerable people to turn heating down by increasing fears about energy use, cost and affordability. See quotes above for illustrations of this.

3. Clearer energy bills. The quotes above indicate that older people struggle to understand and access current information about bills and tariffs. Therefore it should be a priority for energy companies to simplify tariffs available and how information is delivered. Once again caution is required regarding over reliance on the internet.

3.1.1. 'I end up with a big bill because they don't always come out and read your meters and things, and they do a lot of estimates and things like that, and then another company tell you they're going to be so much cheaper and save you

loads of money, and you change over and you end up with a big bill. You know, I don't understand them so the elderly certainly won't.'

2. **Green Deal.** In relation to the Green Deal our research indicates a number of fundamental problems that older people may experience in terms of the acceptability and the accessibility of this intervention.

- 2.1. The first issue relates to the high level of mistrust of energy companies and the Government that is described above, along with fear of fuel affordability. If energy providers are the organisations administering the Green Deal this may be a further disincentive to needy older people to access the scheme.

'Mr Cameron is doing very well at cutting back on everythingI don't like the idea of having a loan round my neck to pay for things. If I thought I could cure that wall there and make this house a lot warmer, yeah I would be interested, but where's the money going to come from? I don't know, if he thinks I can take a loan out on what I've got. He's just took over £112 off me..... Well I don't believe him it will never get any better between me and you. I don't like Mr Cameron, I'd like to shoot him. I don't like him at all, he's just a bloody do-gooder'.

- 2.2. The second issue is that the Green Deal requires assessment of the home and the household energy bills to demonstrate that energy efficiency installations will accrue savings on energy bills. These assessments may be off putting to older people who value privacy regarding their home and finances. The concept and process associated with eligibility assessment for such schemes was considered unacceptable to many of our participants.

- 2.3. Finally, the Green Deal is a loan based system where funds are released to the household and repaid from savings from energy bills. This was unacceptable to the majority of our sample and seen to be unattractive to older people in particular. Older people, especially those from low income households, are debt averse. The thought of any debt or loan when they no longer had earning potential was unacceptable. In addition, older generation have great pride and a fear of losing their independence. Our participants all reported that they would not ask for help from a loan, but might have considered a grant based system – if they understood it. Our data indicates older people will not access an initiative that will saddle the home with debt especially if they will not live to see the benefit, or they want to pass on their home to family debt free. The fact that the financial benefit is long term is a disincentive to older people accessing a loan based scheme where financial gain is realised in the future. Any benefit to future climate change and environment was not an incentive to older people who focus on short term goals and outcomes. The perceived risk of a mental health and stress impact of being in debt also made the Green Deal unacceptable. Older people reported that, due to thrift and stoicism, they would put up with inefficient and faulty equipment until it was completely malfunctioning rather than access a scheme like Green Deal. Upgrading a heating system that they perceive to be still functioning is not seen as a priority.

'It's going to be big energy companies isn't it what's going to be making money out of this and they'll get tax relief on it'.

'They're going to get people in debt again, and how are they going to pay it back? It's silly isn't it? It's so stupid, how are they going to pay it? The Government is so stupid. They [older people] are not going to earn any more.'

'Available information on Green Deal is not clear and as it stands.... They [older people] would not take a loan out on their property when they wouldn't live to see the benefit. Also if they wanted to pass it on to family.'

'It would take a lot of persuading, they would be nervous of it I think, because they'd be worried about getting, so there'd have to be a lot of explanation and publicity as to how they weren't going to be punished further when they come to pay the bills'. 'And also the fact that they're leaving a debt basically to their children'

'How are they going to pay that debt off? Because they're more stressed....This would mentally, you know, people will be more stressed out because they'd have that worry of how to pay that back. How are they going to pay back?'

(Interviewee speaking through an interpreter). 'She is saying that she has many problems with her radiators and she is only interested in the Green Deal if they can replace the radiators without a loan.'

'People won't want to change the heating systems will they will they break down? To be honest, it's a fact of life, you only change something when it breaks down, you don't, nobody says oh I'll change that radiator it looks a bit big and I've had it in 10 years. They change that radiator when it's got a leak on it, but that is a fact of life. I mean I only changed my gas boiler because last time I had somebody out to it, it were a back boiler, he says this is costing you thousands of pounds, he said I'm telling you, he said it's not worth repairing it'.

'People only change systems like that because they're not. You might change your wallpaper because you don't like the colour of it anymore and you want to change it, so you change it. But your heating systems and things like that, you don't change until you have to'.

'An older person, they think 'well how long will it last me, how long am I going to be here'? That's what they do. I mean their mindset changes to ours, with somebody who's younger plans ahead and now plans for the future..... A lot of people as they get older they don't, well it don't bother me, why bother about it?'

'As people get older they're not thinking about how much change, about what they can plan to do and where they can go and what they do....All they're constantly thinking about is how much time have I got left, what can I do in that time, what can I leave to my family'.

4. This study has provided evidence to illustrate how older vulnerable people face a number of barriers that prevent them keeping warm and accessing initiatives that may help them, for example the Green Deal. In relation to the evidence a concern exists about the accessibility of the current proposals regarding energy efficiency.

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