

Fighting Fuel Poverty

Project Evaluation
2020 to 2022

June 2022



Context

Across the UK many people suffer ill-health or are at risk of becoming ill due to living in cold, damp homes.

There were 63,000 excess winter deaths in 2020/21 in England and Wales. It is estimated that 30% of excess winter deaths are due to health problems associated with cold homes.

Low income, poorly insulated housing, and expensive, inadequate heating systems contribute to fuel poverty. This will be exacerbated by rising energy prices and the cost of living crisis.

For people in Dorset & BCP Council areas, living in a cold home causes health problems, the most vulnerable groups being:

- the elderly
- pregnant women and young children
- people with respiratory health conditions
- people with cardiovascular health conditions
- people with disabilities
- people in fuel poverty, unable to pay their energy bills.

Dorset is located in the South West, which has the largest regional fuel poverty gap (2022) in the country. Specific issues in Dorset & BCP Council areas include:

- Poor housing stock - higher numbers of properties with SAP (energy performance) ratings of under 35 than the national average
- Large proportion of off-gas properties, which typically are harder to heat - 50.7% in West Dorset, 47.2% in North Dorset, 45.9% in Bournemouth
- Fuel poverty especially high in certain areas - 12.2% households in Weymouth & Portland are in fuel poverty, 11.5% in Bournemouth
- Wages are low but housing costs high - gross weekly pay in the area is 10% below the national median, and yet lower quartile house prices are more than 33% higher than national average
- Deprived areas - 12 areas of Dorset are in the top 20% most deprived nationally for multiple deprivation
- Rurality and access to services making self-disconnection more prevalent - 41% Dorset county population live in rural areas, making topping up of prepayment meters a particular challenge

Project Overview

Fighting Fuel Poverty was funded by the Energy Industry Voluntary Redress Scheme for 2 years from July 2020 to June 2022. Funding was also received from Dorset Community Foundation for Surviving Winter Grants.

The project sought to fight fuel poverty across the Dorset and BCP Council areas through working with vulnerable households on means tested benefits through:

1. Making a direct and long-lasting improvement to vulnerable consumers' health and wellbeing
2. Providing a short-term grant to help to the most vulnerable consumers to prevent their problems escalating and causing further detriment
3. Increasing financial resilience of vulnerable consumers, empowering and up-skilling individuals to protect or represent their interests

Citizens Advice East Dorset & Purbeck were the lead agency and worked with the following local delivery partners to achieve this:

Citizens Advice Bournemouth Christchurch & Poole

Citizens Advice Bridport & District

Citizens Advice Central Dorset

Citizens Advice in Dorset

Dorset Community Foundation

Fighting Fuel Poverty aimed to work with 2000 vulnerable households on means-tested benefits through:

1350 in-depth face to face appointments

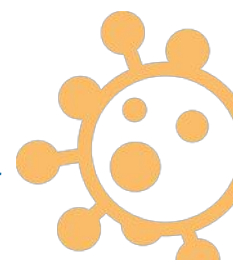
150 home visits

500 telephone advice appointments

500 Surviving Winter grants

Covid-19

In March 2020, Covid-19 caused unprecedented challenges for our service and the people we help. People continued to access quality advice through phone and online channels even when our service stopped delivering face to face support.



Theory of Change

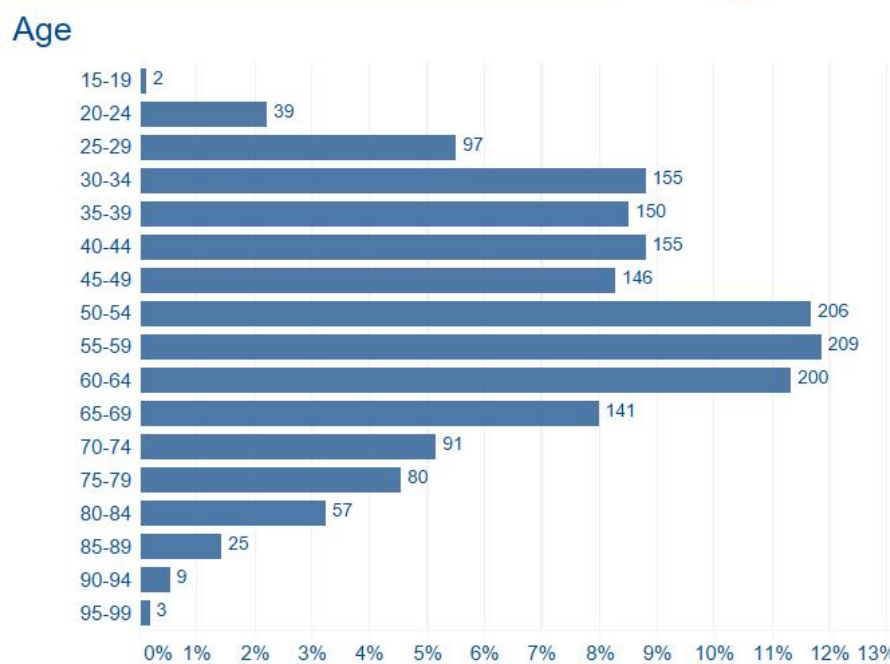
Activities	Need	Outcomes	Impact
People are living in or at risk of fuel poverty.	In-depth appointments with Energy Affordability Advisers in local Citizens	People are connected to support available to them.	Increased financial resilience and resilience to fuel poverty
People live in cold homes, which may cause cold-related health issues	Advice outreach or through home visit where needed	People are informed about their options and supported to resolve their practical problems, which helps to resolve these.	People are more likely to be able to meet the heating requirements of their home
People use energy (heating) they cannot afford and debts mount	Households may self-refer by phone or email, or be referred by another organisation	Financial capability and confidence is increased	Resolving practical issues can lead to improvements in health and wellbeing for people - staying warm and safe helps prevent or worsen cold-related health problems.
People encounter problems they don't know how to deal with, and they need advice or support	Advice is focussed on resolving the energy issue(s), and other related issues may be internally referred within the service	Receiving advice and support reduces stress and anxiety for people.	
People lack funds to top-up and self-disconnect	Surviving Winter grants paid to vulnerable households to provide short term relief, while advice focuses on longer-term change.	Depending on the issue, social determinants of health are improved (e.g. increased income/ reduced debt, improved housing).	People are more able to manage day to day, with reduced stress and higher levels of wellbeing.

Need: Have we reached the right people?

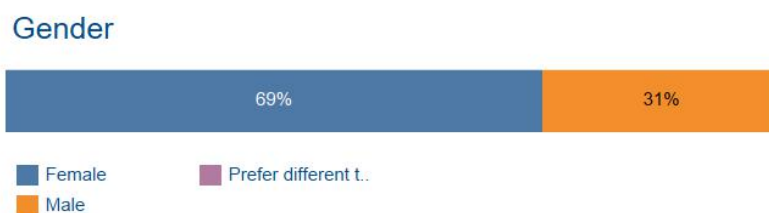
Who has accessed the service?

Fighting Fuel Poverty has helped 1,780 households through 2,004 cases. Project eligibility was checked on referral/self-referral so that we are confident we have reached people in or at risk of fuel poverty who are eligible for mean-tested benefits. The lead client's details were logged in our database and that data is shown below, where recorded.

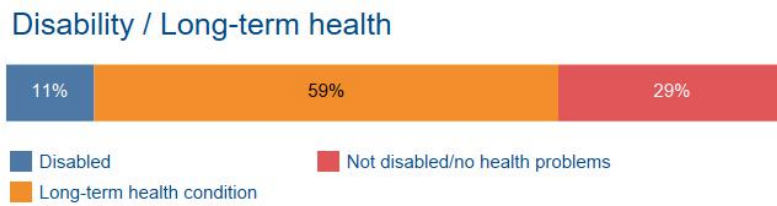
The project helped people of a broad range of age which is largely in line with local census data, with notably higher proportions of people aged 50 to 64:



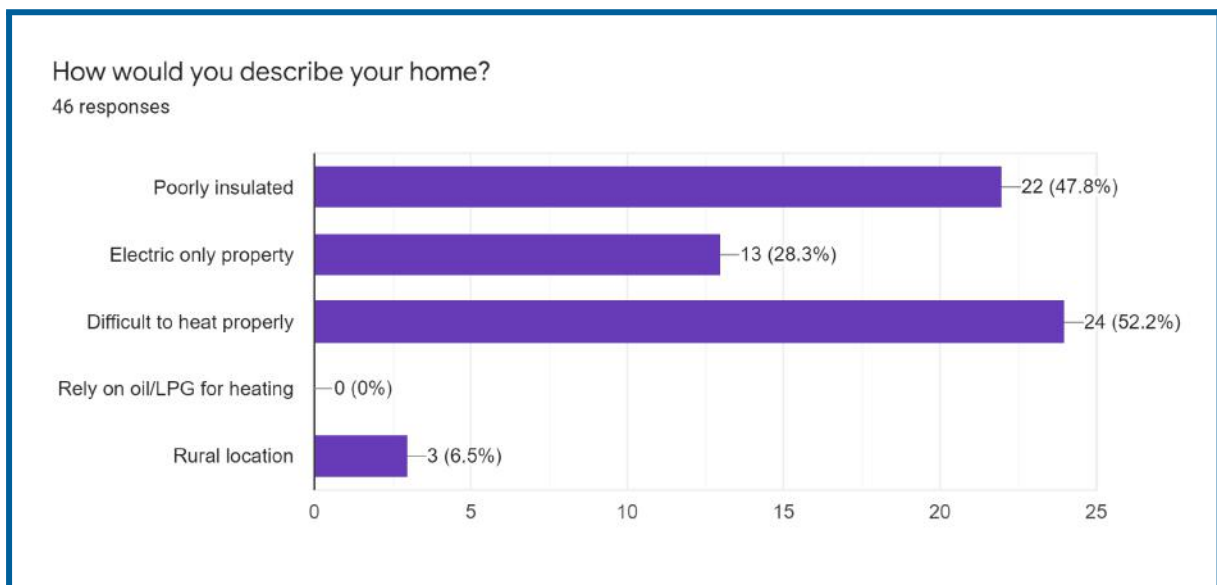
The project helped a larger proportion of women than in the general population, which is in line with our generalist advice service:



71% of lead project beneficiaries told us they had a disability or long-term health condition. This is significantly higher than in the general population and may demonstrate a higher risk of fuel poverty among this population:



We conducted surveys with 50 Surviving Winter grant recipients. One question we asked recipients was how they described their home, to which we received 46 responses:



Dorset and BCP Council areas are a mix of very rural locations and more urban areas with a wide range of type of housing. Regardless of their location, a significant number of recipients reported that their property is poorly insulated and difficult to heat.

What did people need help with?

All clients helped by the project were in or at risk of fuel poverty. To help monitor what we help people with, we record issue codes on each case and case note. Each case had an average 5 unique issue codes recorded. Top level issues are summarised below:

Issues		
	Issues	Clients
Benefits & tax credits	1,218	416
Benefits Universal Credit	454	185
Charitable Support & Food Ban..	51	44
Consumer goods & services	1,121	558
Debt	522	297
Education	14	5
Employment	28	11
Financial services & capability	739	446
GVA & Hate Crime	3	2
Health & community care	100	53
Housing	300	171
Immigration & asylum	5	4
Legal	2	2
Other	1,257	586
Relationships & family	13	11
Tax	29	25
Travel & transport	35	23
Utilities & communications	4,258	1,303
Grand Total	10,149	

Unsurprisingly, utilities and communications is overwhelmingly the biggest issue recorded, with benefits & tax credits, consumer goods & services and 'other' also being significant. NB 'other' was used during this period to record charitable grants and food parcels.

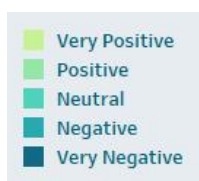
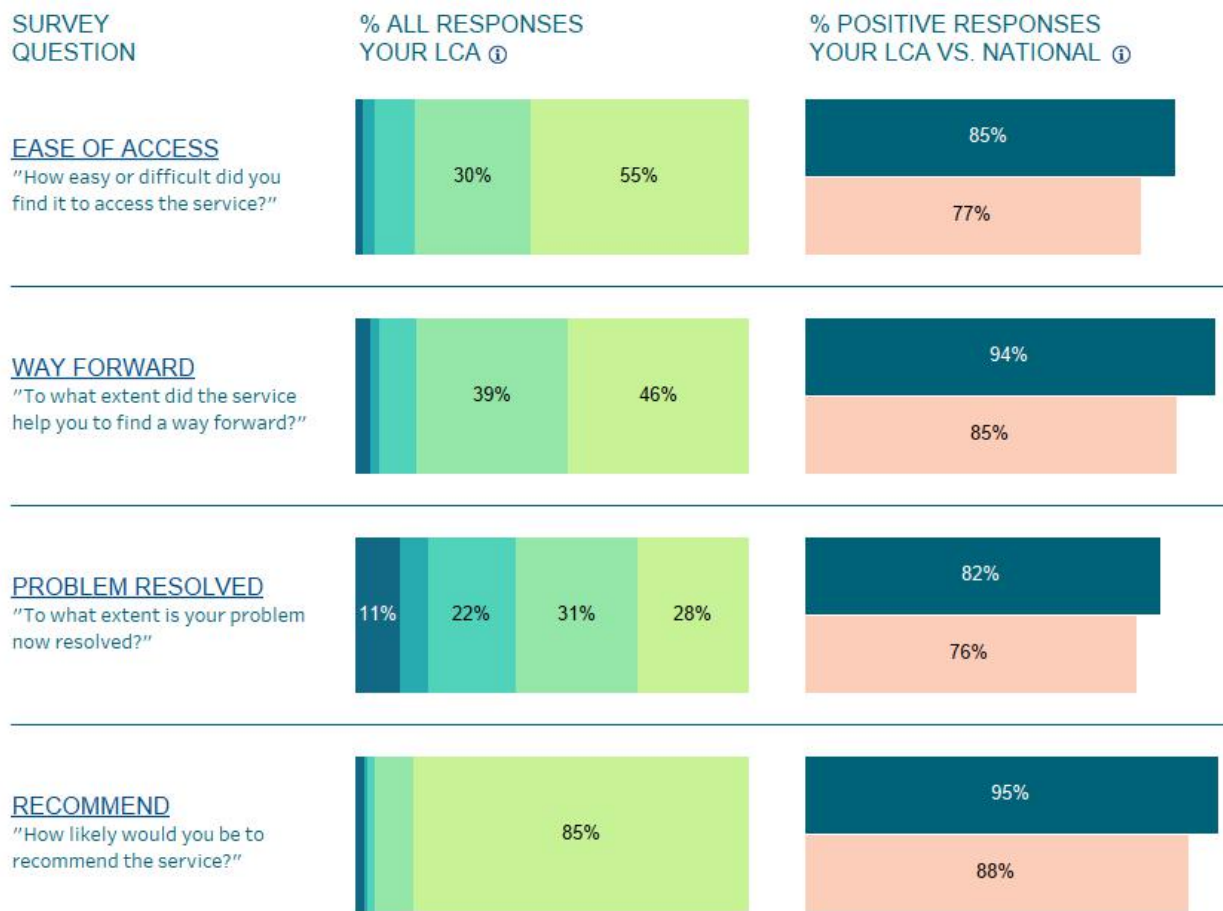
Each Level 1 issue code (listed in the table above) is further broken down into a level 2 and then level 3 issue code. The most prevalent level 2 issue code, Fuel, is broken down in the table below. It can be noted that billing, meter reading and price/tariff issues are especially common in the project.

Issue codes: Utilities & communications / Fuel	No. of issues
Selling methods and switching supplier	98
Billing/meter reading	833
Methods of payment	130
Cancellation & withdrawal	5
Issues with supply	29
Contract terms & conditions	13
Customer service	43
Price or tariff - gas or elec	963
Oil/LPG - cost or other issues	17
Warm Home discount	774
Priority Services Register	485
Complaints & redress	66
Smart meter - installation	60
Smart meter - switching problems	15
Smart meter - inaccurate or estimated bills	26
Smart meter - remote disconnection	1
Smart meter - awareness	50
Smart meter - memory impairment	4
Smart meter - pre-payment meters	101
Smart meter - Social / behavioral impairment	5
Smart meter - Speech Impairment	8
Smart meter - General information	41
Smart meter - other	36
Other	197

Activities: How good was the service people received?

How do people feel about the service they received?

People helped through the project were asked for consent for us to request client satisfaction data from them. The following table shows client satisfaction data across Citizens Advice East Dorset & Purbeck between July 2020 and March 2022. In the right hand column the figure in blue indicates the percentage of positive responses for Citizens Advice East Dorset & Purbeck vs the national figures in pink.



No complaints were received about the project.

Through the client experience survey clients are also able to submit free text responses. Here are a selection:

"I spoke to Laura and she made me feel completely at ease. She was very helpful and kept in touch regularly and kept me up to date with everything. She also talked me through the whole procedure so I could understand what was happening. Would definitely recommend and use this service again."

"A lady from Purbeck Citizens Advice, Laura helped me solve my issues and I will be eternally grateful to them all. Great service and advice thank you again. Regards"

"I had an extremely helpful, kind, caring and reassuring lady called Ros help me through some very hard times. Ros went out of her way to help me with all she could. Thank you Ros."

We also surveyed 50 Surviving Winter grant recipients who had an opportunity to give free-text feedback. Whilst most people chose to speak about the impact the service had on their lives, the following feedback relates to the quality of service received. All comments relating to quality of service were positive.

"Amazing service thank you so much all the teams members I spoke with were super helpful"

"The service was fantastic. I wasn't initially aware that I could get help. Again. I am extremely grateful for all your help. I think I would have been very poorly as I couldn't afford the heating."

"Service is unbelievable, one of the best services I have received in the UK."

"CAB were faultless, having moved twice in 9 months getting to grips with the Providers was a blinking nightmare."

Was the service delivered as planned?

As mentioned above, Covid-19 caused the biggest impact on service delivery. This meant that a largely face-to-face project became a largely telephone-based project.

We worked with 1,780 unique households in 2,004 cases. We helped them with 10,144 issues through 20,253 activities. An activity would include an appointment with a client, a call to a third party or casework preparation. The activities are broken down by channel in the table below:

Channel	Total
Telephone	10,161
Email	6,263
Admin	3,106
Letter	288
Web chat / video call	208
Other	180
In person	105

The people we helped had, on average, more complex problems than we had previously seen in our energy advice work. There were over 5 issues recorded on average for each case, and on average there were over 11 contacts between Caseworkers and each household receiving advice. This notably impacted the final number of unique clients helped.

There were a higher number of cases than clients helped. This was due to the fact that some clients came back more than 6 months after receiving help from the project, to receive help again.

Outcomes: What was different for the client after advice?

Many outcomes have been achieved for clients. Some are specific and measurable and others are soft outcomes relating to confidence, knowledge and skills.

The table below shows the financial outcomes gained by people helped through the project.

Financial Outcomes	
Income gain	£750,696
Re-imburements, services, loans	£51,205
Debts written off	£2,157
Repayments rescheduled	£717
Other (including food parcels and charitable grants)	£215,826

Total financial outcomes recorded exceed £1m. We anticipate that the true value of financial outcomes achieved will be higher than this due to under-recording. There will also be further outcomes achieved after 30th June as third parties make and notify us of decisions.

Alongside the financial gains made by clients there have equally been gains in capacity to manage and improved health. Whilst more difficult to measure, over 50% of clients have been recorded as having improved health and capacity to manage.

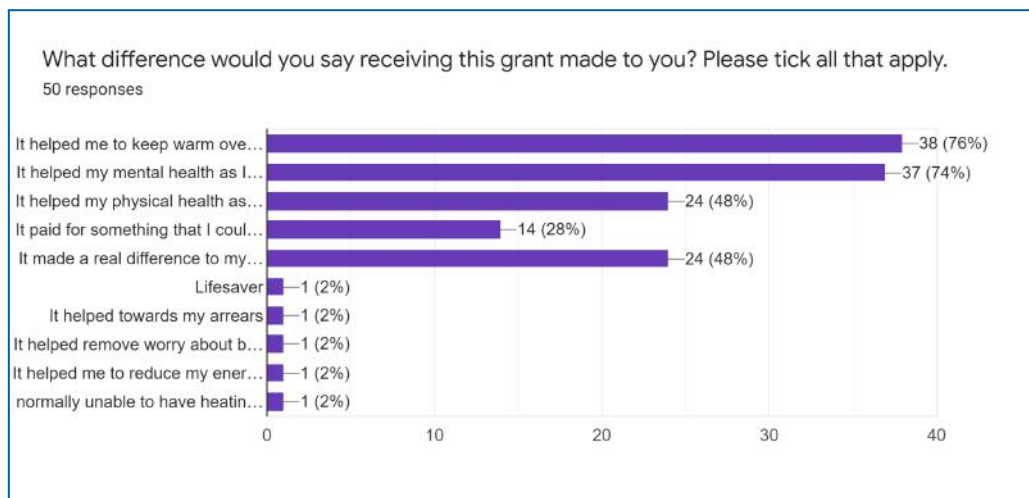
838 clients have been recorded as having issues with tariff and price and 717 with bills and meter reading. This is an indicator of how many clients have received advice that will aid them in better understanding their bills and tariffs and how to read their energy meters, therefore increasing their financial resilience. For those clients who received specific help with changing tariff the gain average was £200 per client.

As a result of energy advice at least 346 clients have been recorded as engaging with suggested behavioural changes and 442 are recorded as having engaged

with practical energy efficiency advice. This will have aided clients in achieving their heating needs as well as reducing unnecessary usage (and cost).

Surviving Winter Survey

In our Surviving Winter grant survey, respondents were asked what difference the grant had made to them. Recipients reported that the grant had enabled them to keep warm over winter, but also that it had made more of an impact on their mental health than their physical health. The stress and worry about affording to pay bills has an enormous impact on households:



Recipients were asked to make free-text responses, some of which are included below where the responses related to specific outcomes. It is notable that for many there is a reduction in stress levels, particularly when related to health conditions. For some respondents, there is still uncertainty about how they will manage in the future.

“Thank you so much for the help, it really helped me get out of that debt and keep warm that winter, my mental health was better in regards to this, as I didn't have to worry about owing money or having my supply cut off at all, bonus that I could use my heating properly for the first time. Thank you again! :)”

“Thank you for helping me. It made such a difference to be able to keep my house warm without worrying about how I was going to pay for it.”

“Helped but I'm unsure going into this year whether I can afford to keep the flat warm.”

“Very grateful for the grant due to my sudden change of circumstances and health issues.”

“The grant was put on electric to keep me warm in winter cause I was on chemo all winter I felt the cold.”

“It took an enormous amount of stress away for me.”

“Grant helps but with the further price increases not sure how much it will help in future.”

“It has given me a little peace of mind, for a little while, thank you so much.”

“Without this grant my health would have suffered greatly, I would like to take this opportunity to thank you so much for providing me with this grant.”

“This Energy Grant/Assistance is invaluable especially for those (like me) who have scarcely any money to spare at all. It really does alleviate the constant worry of how to cope. All the efforts made by so many different agencies and people who care about those they don't even know, is extremely heartwarming and very much appreciated. Thank you to all concerned.”

“Incredibly important grant for me. Without it I would have definitely finished the year with a fuel debt. I am disabled with a condition that becomes unbearable in the cold and damp of winter, without heating. A huge thank you to the charity providing the grant and yourselves for making me aware of it and organising the application.”

Impact: What does this mean for people's lives?

Further to the quotes given above, the case studies below demonstrate the impact on three households helped by the project.

Jemma

Jemma lives with her adult daughter who has mental health issues. Her daughter's DLA ended and PIP was refused, so Jemma lost her Carers Allowance and Carer's Premium. Jemma's boiler was broken, she had an energy debt of £1500 and her in-home display was not working properly.

Fighting Fuel Poverty worked with Jemma to:

- negotiate affordable debt repayments with her provider
- apply for a Surviving Winter grant
- apply for energy debt write-off
- request her supplier to fix the in-home display
- get the boiler replaced via external referral
- ensure she was getting full welfare benefit entitlement.

Jemma got her energy debt written off through an Energy Trust, she received full funding for a new boiler, light bulbs and radiator foils. Her income increased by £151 per month through benefits applications. Jemma received a £200 Surviving Winter grant, and her in-home display was fixed which has reduced her anxiety around energy spending.

"You have not just helped me, you have given me tools to help myself. You are a brilliant, amazing group of people who have completely changed my mindset and I can't thank you enough."



Omar

Omar and his wife owned their three-bed house. Their business had collapsed during the Covid-19 pandemic and Omar was unable to work due to ill-health. His health issues were made worse by living in a cold home. The couple had been living on a part time salary and they were struggling to put the heating on, and to meet other costs.

Fighting Fuel poverty worked with Omar to:

- encourage behavioural change to reduce unnecessary energy consumption and to reduce damp
- request cheaper tariff from supplier
- register for Warm Home Discount
- apply for Surviving Winter grant
- informed about Priority Services Register
- gain referral for energy efficiency measures

Omar reduced his energy bills with a cheaper tariff, and is confident in submitting meter readings going forwards. He is hoping to get new loft insulation through a local Help Through Warmth scheme which will reduce his bills.

Omar and his wife are now on the Priority Services Register and have received £340 in grant payments to help in the short run. They have also taken the decision to change the way they use energy in the home, reducing damp and draughts, making it both more affordable and also a healthier home to live in. Omar says Fighting Fuel Poverty has reduced his stress levels.



Carly

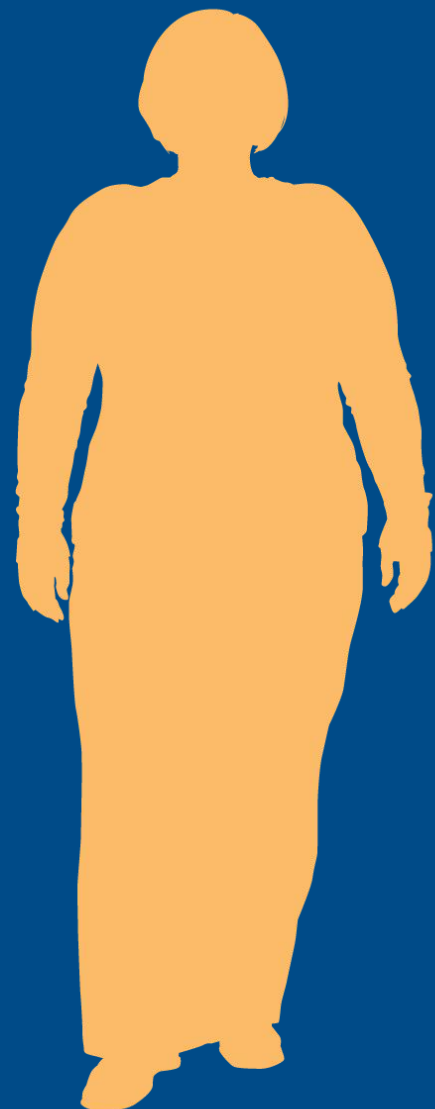
Carly had recently lost her husband. She remained in the family council house and cared for her three adults sons. Carly was overwhelmed by all the things she needed to do and had no idea where the household energy account was at.

Fighting Fuel poverty worked with Carly to:

- Perform welfare benefits check and complete applications
- Apply for bereavement support
- Explain how to manage an energy account including submitting meter readings and tariff comparisons
- Make a complaint to her supplier
- Apply for Surviving Winter grant
- Inform about Warm Home Discount
- Encourage energy saving tips to reduce unnecessary consumption

Carly's income increased by £75 per month through new welfare benefits. Carly gained £400 through a Surviving Winter grant, supplier complaint resolution and Warm Home Discount. She has learnt how to take and submit readings to her supplier to keep on top of her bills and feels confident to do an energy comparison herself.

Carly is utilising the skills she learnt to review other costs such as insurance, broadband and TV, which will help reduce household expenditure and therefore leave more money for heating and food. The whole household is working on reducing their unnecessary energy consumption going forwards.



Lessons learned

We worked with households far more intensively than we originally expected to, however this work was required to make not just outcomes for people, but to achieve a longer term impact on peoples' lives.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the impact on being unable to offer face-to-face advice for a period, we have developed better ways of working with clients via telephone and email services. For many clients, especially for those living in rural areas, or who are working or with caring responsibilities, this may be a more convenient way of receiving advice. We hasten to add that some of the most vulnerable people we help will still achieve the greatest impact through face-to-face services and in particular home visits.

Our statistics continue to show a high percentage of people helped by the project either have a disability or long term health condition (71%). This is higher than we anticipated and will be useful data to aid future funding bids to help secure services for vulnerable households.

At no point in the project did we struggle for referrals, showing we have good referral systems in place - notably running the Dorset Energy Advice Line and having capability of receiving referrals from local Citizens Advice offices across the area.

A project which has cost just over £350,000 to deliver has created minimum financial gains for people of over £1 million. Over half of people helped improved their health and/or financial capability.

Our outcomes recording could have been better, as we believe actual outcomes achieved are significantly higher, especially for 'soft' or 'non-financial' outcomes. We will ensure in future that recording mechanisms are included at the very start of the project planning process, to agree a consistent approach for recording these in our database, and requesting changes as needed.

Conclusion

The Fighting Fuel Poverty project has demonstrated that there is a clear need for energy advice in Dorset & BCP Council areas, beyond the initial advice that would normally be given by generalist advisers. The team of trained Energy Caseworkers, with considerable knowledge of energy issues, have worked hard to support clients throughout a challenging period of Covid-19, energy price rises and the wider cost of living crisis.

Fighting Fuel Poverty has helped 1,780 vulnerable households with energy advice and Surviving Winter grants. We have demonstrated that we have made a direct and long-lasting improvement to the health and wellbeing of vulnerable people, and also that financial resilience has increased, empowering and up-skilling individuals to protect or represent their interests. We believe the project has achieved a very great impact for people in this respect.

We are hopeful that we will be able to secure funding to continue the project going forwards. There is clearly a huge need amongst the community and we continue to see a large number of referrals into the Dorset Energy Line. We anticipate this need will rise further in October as people on prepayment meters feel harder the bite of the energy price rises.

A further legacy of the project has been that of working with our 6 partners to deliver this project. We believe that through partnership working, we have been able to offer value for money whilst also improving the client journey for the people we have helped.



Finally, we would like to say a big thank you to everyone who has contributed to Fighting Fuel Poverty.

Free, confidential advice. Whoever you are.

We help people overcome their problems and campaign on big issues when their voices need to be heard.

We value diversity, champion equality, and challenge discrimination and harassment.

We're here for everyone.



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