Contents

The lived experiences of fuel poverty 5

Introduction 9

A note on methodology 9

Findings 10

1) The effects of living in fuel poverty 11
   a) Personal effects 11
   b) Social effects 13
   c) Economic effects 14

2) Coping with fuel poverty 16
   a) Coping with the personal effects of fuel poverty 16
   b) Coping with the social effects of fuel poverty 18
   c) Coping with the economic effects of fuel poverty 18

3) The unintended outcomes of coping 21
   a) The reproduction of disadvantage 21
   b) The tyranny of the small things 22

4) Intervening 24

5) Conclusions and insights for policy and practice 28

Endnotes 31
Foreword

Chris Train, MD National Grid Gas Distribution and
Jeremy Nesbitt, MD National Grid Affordable Warmth Solutions

Fuel poverty is one of the biggest challenges facing the energy sector. But it’s not just an energy industry problem; the knock-on effects of being unable to adequately heat a home are felt by society, and the economy.

‘Making a House a Home’ sets out in a compellingly stark manner how real families struggle to cope with inadequate or no heating. The case study which opens the report makes for sober reflection. You cannot fail to be moved by the descriptions of what it feels like to find yourself in fuel poverty today. Sadly, these stories are replicated in cities, towns and villages across the country.

At National Grid we are the pipes and cables that connect people to the energy they need. So why should an engineering firm that operates the gas and electricity systems care about fuel poor households?

Our Gas Distribution business is where we are closest to the customer and are able to reach more than 11 million homes across four networks in England. We lay and repair the pipes that go into customers’ homes, and respond to their gas emergency calls if they smell gas or detect carbon monoxide. We aren’t just taking part in the fuel poverty debate because we can, we are doing so because it’s the responsible and right thing to do.

In 2009 we set up National Grid Affordable Warmth Solutions to support the Government’s fuel poverty strategy and develop innovative solutions to help those using more expensive heating sources get their costs down. Gas connections play an important role in tackling fuel poverty as they can cut heating bills by as much as a thousand pounds a year. We are working to connect more than 35,000 fuel poor homes to gas by 2021, but this is only part of the solution.

Across the energy industry there is so much more to be done. We all have a responsibility to tackle fuel poverty and collaboration is crucial to making this a reality and bringing benefits to families across the country. It’s the responsibility of us all to reach out beyond our usual boundaries, form partnerships and develop joined-up projects. At National Grid we’re using all the tools we have at our disposal to play a part in the fight against fuel poverty. We’ve had some success, but as this report shows, we know there is still much more to do.

We urge everyone involved in reviewing energy policy and energy company obligations, to focus on the individuals and families affected by their decisions, and keep a copy of this report at hand as an instant reminder of why we have to get this right.
Making a house a home:
Providing affordable warmth solutions for children and families living in fuel poverty
The lived experiences of fuel poverty¹

Ryan, Keely, Stacy and Paige Williams live with their mother Amanda and their dog Bess in a three bedroom, terraced house on the Belgrave estate in Tamworth – a development built in the 1970s to absorb the population overspill from Birmingham. Today the Belgrave estate suffers high levels of deprivation on multiple counts.¹ One of the millions of households living in fuel poverty in the UK,² until recently the Williams’ struggled to keep their house warm at an affordable cost.

Ryan and Keely, the two younger children, spoke about coming home from school and walking through the front door into a ‘cold waterfall,’ ‘no, into a sheet of ice.’ And at night, how it felt like they were sleeping on ‘wet pillows,’ ‘no, it was worse than that, it was like sleeping on a block of ice.’

Stacy – the middle girl – spoke about trying to do her homework in the winter and how her hand would get so cold poking out from under the duvet as she sat wrapped up in bed working, that it would completely seize up. And Paige – the eldest girl – spoke about her feet. How they would go a funny kind of blueish black colour, and how she could hardly feel them when it was cold. Just as well, she said, then she would not feel the cold.

Amanda said that regardless of how much money she put on the electric meter she could not get the house to a decent temperature in winter. Even borrowing money from her children was not enough to keep the cold at bay, and how she hated doing that – taking from her children, and for something so basic, what kind of a mother did that make her? However hard she worked to earn money, to try and keep her children warm, it was never enough.

So the Williams’ would do everything to try and keep warm. Bed was often the best place to be, so as much as possible would be done there – eating breakfast, getting dressed, doing homework, eating dinner, hanging out, watching television. All of it in bed. And when they did have to get out of bed, they would wear double layers of clothes, dressing gowns and coats, blankets and duvets. They would warm their hands on the PlayStation or the X-Box, sit on their hands, clutch hot drinks, get the dog to sit on their feet – anything to try and warm up.

In the middle of the night though, bed was yet another source of discomfort and required a whole new set of coping tactics that had become deeply ingrained in everyday life. There were the health-related issues; Ryan’s asthma, and the way the cold prompted an attack, which resulted in at least one hospital visit each winter and multiple trips to the doctor. There was Amanda’s psoriasis,⁴ made worse in winter, which required more trips to the doctor and a battery of creams and potions to manage the discomfort it brought.

The cold also had a major impact on the Williams’ emotional well-being. Amanda felt stressed and anxious knowing that she could not keep her children warm in their own home and knowing that money was so tight and the heating so expensive that she could not always afford it. The children worried about their mum and the stress she experienced.

The children’s education and development were also affected. Amanda says the children’s first
words were ‘uh-uh don’t touch’ – in baby-speak – mimicking her as she tried to keep them from burning themselves when they toddled and stumbled about near the storage heaters. And the difficulty Stacy faced getting her homework done; being cold was distracting for her, as well as physically debilitating. So sometimes she did not do her homework, choosing instead to sit with her siblings under a pile of blankets on the sofa where they could share body heat.

The social effects of fuel poverty were just as troubling. The Williams’ would argue, directly about heat or lack of it – about who would get the dog to warm their bed at night, about who would get to sit nearest the extra heater in the living room when it was on, about who would get to go in the shower last when the bathroom was warmest, and about shutting doors to keep the heat in the room. They would snap at each other because they were cold and they were stressed. To avert or escape these negative interactions they sometimes took themselves off to their rooms and under the covers to keep warm and keep from bickering. Paige – the eldest daughter – spoke about the shame of having damp and mould patches in the bathroom as a result of the cold, and about trying cover up the unsightly, tell-tale signs of deprivation; not having gas central heating makes you different. Amanda said that the storage heaters were ugly and embarrassing.

Despite being least able to afford to heat their home, the Williams’ family were amongst those paying the most for their energy. Amanda spent between £80 and £100 a week on her electricity in the winter, most of which went on the heating. She works part-time in a low income job, and between her wages and tax credits she brings in roughly £230 a week. With that she has to pay rent and household bills, feed herself and her four children and pay for school uniforms and other clothes. Fuel costs ate up over 40% of her income in the cold months. So she did what she could to keep daily expenses to a minimum. She did not buy meat, she refrained from using the extra heaters and she purchased of all sorts of supplementary devices for keeping warm.

The coping tactics deployed by Amanda and her children in an effort to make life in fuel poverty more bearable carried with them two unintended outcomes. First, they gave rise to counter-productive consequences which actually functioned to exacerbate the difficulties they already experienced. To cope with the piercing cold in the middle of winter the Williams’ used extra heaters and bought a raft of items designed to harness and store warmth, but spending on these undermined Amanda’s ability to pay for the main heating system as well as other essentials. Sometimes family members would retreat to their beds to try and keep warm, but this left them further isolated from each other and the outside world – potentially compounding the sense that they were somehow different. In order to try and keep the warmth in the rooms Amanda encouraged the children to shut the doors, and in order to save money she encouraged them to turn lights and electrical devices off, but this ‘nagging’ added to the tensions in the house which already ran high in light of being cold.

In order to avoid inflicting discomfort on her friends and embarrassment on herself, Stacy did not invite friends over in the winter months, but she thereby missed out on opportunities for nurturing and cementing her friendships. It seemed that whatever the Williams’ did to deal with the effects of fuel poverty, it triggered some other problem. Theirs was like a house of cards, with everything balancing so precariously in place that a jolt to one part of it would all too easily bring other parts toppling over.
Second, the Williams’ coping tactics and all of their consequences engendered a ‘tyranny of the small things’. To function in a way that most of us take for granted (to keep warm, dry and well-laundered) appeared as the result of a monumental effort. And in this way the small things – the constant ‘nagging’, the arguing over heat, the self-imposed isolation, the penny-pinching, the relentless planning, the waiting, the careful covering up of damp and rot – these small things came to dominate everyday life in the winter. And by the time the tyranny of the small things had become the sine qua non of everyday life, where were the Williams’ supposed to find the time or energy to pursue their dreams or cope with the big things that life threw their way?

For years the Williams’ had no choice but to accept that this was how life was, and would be.
Making a house a home: Providing affordable warmth solutions for children and families living in fuel poverty.
Introduction

This report is about families like the Williams’ and their neighbours and fellow residents in the Belgrave estate in Tamworth. It is about the lived experiences of fuel poverty, but also about an intervention designed to alleviate it and the differences that such interventions can make. The intervention in this case involved connecting properties on the estate to the mains gas network and installing efficient gas central heating systems along with timers, thermostats and individual thermostatic radiator valves. These systems often replaced old and inefficient electric storage heaters, or electric and oil heaters where storage heaters had broken-down and been removed.

In this study we explored the effects of living in fuel-poor households on everyday life, the tactics that people deploy to try to cope with these, and some of the unintended consequences that can ensue from the actions undertaken in an attempt to make life bearable at home when it is cold. Crucially, we explored what happens when a decision is made to intervene and allocate resources to helping families escape the debilitating clutches of fuel poverty.

Fuel poverty affects over two million households in England and more than four million across the UK and it is families with dependent children and young adults that are at greatest risk. Almost one in five (18%) households with a child aged under 16 live in fuel poverty and the risk increases further for lone parent families, one in four of whom are fuel poor. Households with dependent children represent almost half (46.3%) of all fuel-poor households in England – over one million households (1,056,115).

Recent research has shown that children living in inadequately heated houses are more than twice as likely to suffer from conditions such as asthma and bronchitis as those living in appropriate temperatures (Marmott Review, Friends of the Earth, 2011). The risk of experiencing severe ill health during childhood and early adulthood is increased by 25% when children and teenagers grow up in poor housing (Harker, 2006). Furthermore, one in five (20%) parents regularly go without food so that their children can eat (Cooper et al 2014).

This study brings children and young people – as well as their families – to the heart of these debates. In this report we place our participants centre stage to convey their experiences to those whose decisions can have far-reaching and potentially life-changing consequences.

A note on methodology

This evaluation research was commissioned by Affordable Warmth Solutions (AWS) and undertaken by The Children’s Society (TCS) and National Energy Action (NEA). It took the form of a one-year, largely qualitative study comprising three phases; a pre-intervention phase (in which we explored experiences of fuel poverty), a post-intervention phase (in which we asked about the effects of the fuel poverty intervention) and a follow-up phase (in which we gave participants the opportunity to feedback on our findings and to explore medium term impacts). Our sample comprised 20 households, and a total of 20 adults and 35 children and young people (boys and girls, ranging from eight to 21 years of age) took part. We used a mixture of semi-structured interviews, questionnaires and observation to collect our data.
Findings
1 The effects of living in fuel poverty

Using a subjective measure of fuel poverty, we asked adult participants whether they can usually keep their home comfortably warm in winter or when it is cold. In nineteen of our twenty study households, people said that they could not. When we asked why this was, most replied that it was due to both cost (that is, they could not afford to keep the heating on for as long as they required) and that it was not possible to keep their home warm (that is, their home was inefficient and poorly insulated and/or they did not have a working or adequate heating system).

Our research revealed four main issues related to living in a fuel-poor household: **inadequate heat** (a reflection of both insufficient funds to finance required heating and poor insulation in the home), problems with **damp** and related issues with mould and rot, problems around drying **laundry** and problems obtaining sufficient **hot water**. Living with these issues had a wide range of effects on peoples’ everyday lives, and these can be understood within three overarching categories: **personal** (including physical, psychological/emotional and education-related), **social** (within and beyond the household) and **economic** (direct and indirect).

**a) Personal effects**

Young people and adults reported extensively on the physical effects of inadequate heating. One young woman told us:

‘Sometimes... you are shivering, do you know what I mean?... I get sore hands as well, I get dry hands and my lips go blue like if it’s cold... Colds, you get colds, flu and that. My mum gets really dry skin on her hands what cracks, it cracks her hands and they bleed, you can see it’s really sore... Your body just aches, because you are cold, you, when you are cold you want to keep still, your body aches all the time with the cold.’

In addition to this fundamental experience of being cold, other physical, health-related effects emerged with prominence. Aches and pains and underlying joint and muscular problems were reported as worsening in the winter, as were coughs, colds and flu, skin conditions (painfully dry skin, psoriasis, eczema) and experiences of physical numbness and extremities turning blue. In addition, adults reported how existing conditions for them and their children, including respiratory, heart and mobility conditions, were made worse when it was cold. One mother who suffers from osteoarthritis told us...

‘the cold just hits me’...

... and went on to explain how the pain was much worse in the winter. Home was not a place that offered sanctuary from these experiences; rather it was seen to exacerbate them.

Steve and Sarah are teenage siblings who live with their mother and younger brothers and sisters on the Belgrave estate. Sarah is officially recognised as a ‘young carer’ for her mother who suffers from a range of (worsening) physical conditions that severely limit her mobility. Steve also undertakes a range of caring duties, although unlike Sarah he is not a designated carer. In light of their mother’s ill health, Sarah and Steve play a fundamental role in caring for their younger siblings, a role that entails a considerable degree of practical assistance as well as the relentless concern that accompanies looking after young children. The following excerpt is taken from a discussion with Steve and Sarah and indicates how serious the issue of fuel poverty and its physical effects can be for those whose pre-existing health conditions make them particularly vulnerable:
Sarah: When it’s cold in the house, because [our younger brother] was a premmy baby, he’s starts like going blue and stops breathing.

Interviewer: He stops breathing?

Sarah: Yes.

Steve: He has trouble with his lungs because he was premmy and the cold normally sets him off...

Sarah: Yes, he can get quite ill sometimes, but...

Interviewer: Has he ever had to go to hospital?

Steve: On a few occasions.

Sarah: That was mainly when he was little. He was first born in the first winter he came through and he got, he got ill so bad he did have to go to hospital, but then he was in there for a couple of days and

Steve: And that’s when [our younger sister] saved him. She woke up, saw [our younger brother], woke mum up and he was going blue. And had to phone the ambulance and if [our younger sister] wouldn’t have done it he would have went blue for the whole night.

Asthma and other breathing problems were reported among adults and children, and reported as being noticeably worse in the house in the winter months. With such vulnerable physical foundations it is perhaps no wonder that the other effects of fuel poverty come to achieve such prominence in participants’ everyday lives.

In this study, psychological and emotional effects emerged, often unprompted, as particularly pronounced. Participants – especially older girls and mothers – referred to the various feelings and states of mind engendered by inadequate heat and its attendant problems. Moodiness, grumpiness and feeling ‘tetchy’ were widely reported, as were feelings of repulsion and disgust with regards to damp and mould. And there was a general sense of frustration at the incapacity people faced trying to keep warm, dry clothes and get rid of damp in the winter months. As well as being expensive to run, the storage heaters used by many (often old and inefficient) were difficult or impossible to control. Some emitted heat before families rose for the day and this meant that heat was not available when it was needed most – at breakfast and dressing time or throughout the day when some family members were home. Others emitted heat from early morning but the heat output faded through the day and was completely expended by early evening – the very time families were returning from work and/or school. Families were often left with no heating in the evening when they gathered for dinner or family time in front of the television.

In addition to the lack of control and frustration, some participants reported significant levels of stress in relation to their experiences of fuel poverty. In some cases, the lack of affordable heat was a significant stressor in its own right, and in other cases it was one of a number of factors that caused stress, working to compound that stemming from other, unrelated concerns. Some participants also reported feeling worried or anxious about the lack of heat in their homes. For young people (mostly teenage girls) this took the form of concern for their parent’s or younger sibling’s welfare, especially if they were vulnerable in ways additional to living in fuel poverty.

Living in a cold home that was difficult to heat, with energy bills that were unaffordable, meant that financial stress was common. For many, energy bills were one of several outgoings from an already tight and finely balanced budget. Sixteen of the 20 parents interviewed prior to the intervention agreed that they often worried about being able to afford their energy bills. During the third phase of this research, 13 of the 20 families provided further feedback on their experiences before and after they received their gas heating installations. For 11 of these, the cause of worry had been around energy affordability and for two families, the situation in regard to heating their home was nearing crisis point.
Some of our young participants also reported a negative effect on their educational lives – specifically on their experiences of doing homework.8 The following excerpt is taken from an interview with a 15 year old girl:

**Interviewer:** Can we go back to what you were saying about school and school work and stuff? Is it ever an issue, what were you saying?

**Girl:** Yes when I was in year eleven I actually did, I had loads of like assessments and everything and it was really cold and I couldn’t really write.

**Interviewer:** You couldn’t what sorry?

**Girl:** I couldn’t write because of my hands, I struggled to write.

**Interviewer:** It was that cold?

**Girl:** It was freezing actually.

**Interviewer:** What happened?

**Girl:** I didn’t do it.

**b) Social effects**

Alongside the various personal effects of fuel poverty there are a number of social effects, which resonate both within and beyond the household. Many of our young participants reported on intra-household tensions as a result of living in homes characterised by cold. Some reported arguing directly over access to sources of heat – over portable and static heaters, over the blankets and throws available in shared spaces, and sometimes over the other, extra ‘accessories’ that people sometimes turned to in search of warmth. The following excerpt is taken from an interview with an 11 year old boy and his 12 year old sister:

**Sister:** Well, when it’s like really cold you do not want to get out of bed because you want to wrap yourself up in your blanket… Then you come downstairs and it’s freezing, and then you come and sit next to this [pointing to an electric wall mounted heater] and then we end up fighting over the fire.

**Interviewer:** Oh do you?

**Brother:** Yeah hitting each other in the head. Cos she’s bigger than me she tries to push me out of the way so she gets the nearest.

Participants also spoke of relationships within the house feeling tense as a direct result of household members being cold.

The bad moods, grumpiness and tetchiness that people reported feeling in light of the cold was easily manifest in negative forms of interaction – snapping or ‘nipping’ at each other. Other social effects stretched far beyond the boundaries of peoples’ homes, and into relationships with friends and even strangers. Some young people – especially girls – reported friends not wanting to visit in the winter months and others recalled feeling embarrassed about visitors of any kind, in some cases because of the damp and mould that stemmed from inadequate heat and in other cases because of the ‘old fashioned’ heating systems in their homes. Similarly, adults spoke of how living in a cold home meant that they socialised less with friends and family. One mother described how her sister refused to visit because it was so cold, and that she did not feel the ‘same’ as those who had central heating.

The following excerpt is taken from a discussion with a 21 year old young woman who was reflecting on growing up in a fuel-poor home:

**Young woman:** Well all my friends have gas central heating and gas things, so it’s just a lot like, they just switch the fire on and like, just the gas heating and everything is fine and then like everything is warm as soon as you go in. ‘Oh I’ll just turn the heating down a bit.’ Or just turn it up, me. Here it’s just like, no just deal with it. It’s so different.
Making a house a home:
Providing affordable warmth solutions for children and families living in fuel poverty

Interviewer: And do you remember how that made you feel?

Young woman: It does make you feel different, it makes you think well I'm poor like. I mean this is just a poor area and like, but you’re always aware of how rich, of all the different types. Just from living like, my other friend, she lives like two minutes' walk and it’s, she’s got like gas central heating and all that and it does, it does make a difference... It makes you feel a bit like well, you’re a bit deprived I guess. Like there’s certain things you have to sacrifice and stuff.

Interviewer: Like what?

Young woman: Just like, not, you can’t, you are aware of money, like you can’t do this ‘cos you know your mum’s got to, like the electric goes off and you’re just, going to just wake up in the morning and go outside and press the emergency thing and like you just know that they don’t ever have to do that... It makes you want to go over to their house ‘cos it’s cosier. It’s nicer in the winter. I don’t think I’ve ever had anyone stop round. You just feel a bit, I don’t know, embarrassed I guess.

Interviewer: Is that about money in general, not just about the heating?

Young woman: I think a lot, the money does, it did stem a lot from the heating issue.

c) Economic effects

In addition to the social and personal effects of fuel poverty, the economic effects were paramount in the everyday lives of our participants. These economic effects were not only a function of income and the cost of energy, but of poor building quality and a lack of effective insulation and heating. For the adults, living in a fuel poor home was expensive. People spent considerable proportions of their incomes in the winter months on electricity to power and keep their homes warm. For families using a prepayment meter, weekly electricity top-ups were generally around £40-£60 per week, although they could be as much as £100. Either way, when the average household income was just £18,000 per annum (around £350 per week), a substantial proportion was spent on fuel.

For young people, the economic effects of living in fuel poor households were felt both directly and indirectly. Some would give or ‘lend’ their own money to parents to help cover the cost of electricity (a large proportion of which was spent on heating). Some would also give or ‘lend’ their own money to parents to cover other costs of daily living when parents’ incomes had been spent on energy and other household bills. Further, where the adults in the house were spending such significant amounts and proportions of their incomes heating the home, young people would go without other things (‘luxuries’ and necessities), as there was little left in the household budget to pay for them.

For the residents of the Belgrave estate, fuel poverty penetrated deep into daily life, affecting them personally, socially and economically. But it would be a mistake to imagine that these people were helpless victims of fuel-poor circumstances or that they can easily be defined by their vulnerability in this particular sense. They did not sit around freezing, accepting the cold and the related problems with damp, hot water and laundry without putting up a fight. To the contrary, they were actively and relentlessly engaged in the pursuit of warmth and its related home comforts and conveniences – in the business of coping.
Making a house a home: Providing affordable warmth solutions for children and families living in fuel poverty.
2 Coping with fuel poverty

a) Coping with the personal effects of fuel poverty

Participants went to considerable lengths in the endeavour to keep warm in their homes during the cold months, although many of these endeavours had become normalised. Families often turned to secondary heating such as electric wall mounted heaters, oil-filled radiators and electric fan heaters to compensate for the lack of warmth. People wore multiple layers of clothes around the house, wore their clothes to bed as well as pyjamas and wore dressing gowns over their clothes when they were not in bed. They wore outdoor clothes in the house (coats, hats, scarves and gloves), went to bed early and drank a copious number of hot drinks, all in an effort to generate and conserve body heat and/or avoid the need to use energy they could often ill afford. One mother told us how she and her five children all got into her bed in the early evenings to ‘snuggle up’ and watch television with their thick pyjamas on and extra blankets, before heading off to their own cold beds to sleep. The following quote is from a fifteen year old boy who recounted the tactics he used to keep warm at night:

‘I would wear like, wrap up in hoodies and trackies, like go out and come back and go straight in the shower to warm up then put my clothes back on and go to bed. With my clothes on like.’

As well as making the most of what they already had at their disposal, people invested in an array of extra heat-generating and heat-retaining devices in order to keep themselves – and especially their children – warm. Electric blankets, hot water bottles, extra duvets and blankets, fleeces, onesies, ‘snuggies’ (sleeping bags with arms), hand warmers and portable heaters were just some of the items purchased in the effort to keep warm. Some participants also reported using more unusual objects as improvised sources of heat, including electronic goods and in a few cases, pets:

‘[My little sister] has got two extra blankeys and I’ve got my quilt as well that keeps me warm... and I’ve got about two of my favourite dogs that sleep with me. I’ve had them since I was about five or four. And there’s my friend who hasn’t left yet and she gave me her dog and I’ve still got him in my room too.’

Nine year old girl

In addition, people would locate themselves in particular spaces within their homes, with careful calculation of optimal heat retention. For some people this meant confining themselves to their bedrooms (beds), while other young people reported going to a friend’s house, where they knew it would be warm. For others, trying to keep warm meant confining themselves to the (usually one) communal living space, where body heat could be shared. For many it meant constant vigilance over keeping doors and windows shut (or open if they were trying to let condensation out of the bathroom window) in order to retain heat in particular spaces. This often went hand in hand with a heightened attention to turning off electrical devices (such as televisions, gaming devices, stereos, computers, mobile phone chargers and microwaves) in order to try and minimise energy use and conserve that available for trying to heat the home.

For those who reported health problems aggravated by fuel poverty, there was the additional activity related to managing particular health conditions, both
on an ongoing basis and during spikes of related illness.

As well as using tactics for keeping themselves and their houses warm, participants also reported adopting a number of tactics for coping with the related problems of damp, insufficient hot water and the difficulties they experienced trying to get laundry dry. In an effort to get rid of damp, participants reported scrubbing walls (with bleach, other household cleaning products and in some cases with professional, industrial strength products), spraying damp patches with special barrier sprays, painting and re-painting walls and ceilings (with special paints and with regular emulsion), moving and cleaning affected pieces of furniture, buying and installing de-humidifying devices to remove the moisture from the air, keeping windows open in an effort to let moisture escape and prevent it from compounding damp problems, paying for professional damp treatment services and regularly trawling through the contents of their drawers and wardrobes to dispose of clothes, shoes and outerwear that had become damp and gone mouldy. Many also invested in fragrances (in the form of candles, diffusers and room sprays) in an attempt to mask the unpleasant smell of damp.

For those who reported a lack of access to sufficient hot water for washing, endeavours to cope included waiting for immersion heaters to heat, refill and re-heat, using kettles, using alternative sources of hot water (for example showers instead of baths) and sometimes just going without. Similarly, in the attempt to ensure that laundry was dry, a range of tactics emerged: investing in tumble dryers and other electric clothes drying devices, hanging wet laundry strategically around the home in spaces known to be ‘warm spots’; sitting holding items of clothing close to heaters (sometimes staying up late into the night to do so) and trying to iron clothes dry. For some adults, after careful weighing up of the time and money required to ensure their children had clean, dry clothes, a decision would be made to minimise the number of items worn in an attempt to reduce the amount of washing and drying required. The following quote is from the mother of four children:

‘I’ll put the clothes by the heater and then it dries but it takes days in the winter. School uniform, I’ve always made sure that it’s been done. I’ll hang it over the doors and that. And PE kits. But the rest of the clothes, I try to make them just wear the same thing all week. Nine times out of ten in the winter they don’t play outdoors so they just live in their pyjamas. So, that’s what they do.’

As well as using a range of tactics to cope with the physical problems emanating from the cold and damp, some participants would also endeavour to actively contend with the emotional and psychological fallout from their experiences of fuel poverty – the bad moods, the worry, the stress and the guilt. For young people this often took the form of trying to reassure parents, and in some cases stepping in to find solutions to the fuel poverty-related problems that were causing parental anxiety. The following quote is from a teenage girl speaking of her experience trying to help her mother cope with a particularly expensive electricity bill she had received the previous winter:

‘She was like worrying about it, so obviously I don’t like it when she gets stressed out obviously. So I was trying to help her out with how she was supposed to sort out other bills so that she’d got enough money to pay them all, like trying to kind of sort it all out.’
b) Coping with the social effects of fuel poverty

The social effects of living in cold, damp homes also engendered their own set of coping tactics. In response to the tensions that some people experienced at home in light of the cold, some would retreat to parts of the house where they could avoid aggravating brewing interpersonal frictions – to bedrooms or other communal rooms where they could be alone (although this option was limited by the generally small size of houses in relation to the number of household members). Others would go to friends’ houses or go out with friends in order to escape the tensions at home. Some of our participants also responded actively to the shame or embarrassment they felt about the damp in their houses by going to considerable lengths to cover up the unsightly stains that marked walls, ceilings and items of furniture. Some young people reported not having friends to ‘stop over’ in the winter, as the following quote from an interview with a 14 year old girl illustrates:

‘It makes it awkward if [friends] come round and they’re cold. Yeah, that makes things awkward. I probably don’t have friends over in the winter.’

c) Coping with the economic effects of fuel poverty

The economic effects of fuel poverty added yet another layer of coping behaviours to a workload that, for some, was already beginning to creak under the weight of required effort. For many families during the winter period there was a complex and dynamic interplay between heating the home and meeting other demands for time and money, such as shopping. For some families being warm was a priority. Those with some flexibility in their household budget – either because of a slightly higher income or because they paid for energy via Direct Debit (which afforded them some elasticity and choice over expenditure) – felt able to keep the heating on when it was needed. For others, heating the home – even to a level that fell short of comfort – was not possible. Families responded to this by rationing – both energy and other things usually thought of as essential. Thirteen households told us that they regularly rationed their energy use in winter by turning down or turning off their heating when they would rather not have. The same number agreed that paying for energy sometimes meant they had to cut back on other essentials, such as food and fresh produce. Others cut back on non-essentials. For most families, regardless of the coping strategies and budgeting practices adopted to meet the basic needs of the family, paying for the energy required was a financial struggle that resulted in both the rationing of energy and other essentials.

For young people, responding to economic effects of fuel poverty took a variety of forms. For some at the lower end of our sample age range, who had lent their parents money, there was a palpable effort to recoup it. For others in this category, there was a reluctance to ask for repayment of loans, as they were all too aware that their parents were struggling financially and did not want to add pressure to overstretched household budgets. For some children, coping with the economic effects of fuel poverty meant covering the cost of certain ‘core’ expenses with the bits and pieces of money they accumulated throughout the year – from birthdays, Christmases and visits from the tooth fairy. The following is an excerpt from a conversation with a nine year old girl, and follows on from a discussion about school:

Girl: This year there’s a camp. Years four, five and six get to go to camp

Interviewer: Oooh are you looking forward to that?

Girl: Yes but this year it might be a spoiler for me ‘cos I might not be able to go. It’s about £96
Interviewer: Oh dear

Girl: My mum says it’s too expensive but I’m like no, I’ll use my own money.

Interviewer: Will you?

Girl: Yes ‘cos it’s been saving up for a long time ‘cos last year my granddad gave me a money tin and I got some spare money from aunties and uncles and granddads. Like birthdays, Christmas, New Year, even Easter. And the tooth fairy came the other day or month – look [she grins to reveal a big gap where a tooth has come out]

Interviewer: Have you got enough?

Girl: I don’t know. I hope so.

And so it was that the people in this study were engaged in a seemingly endless cycle of activity designed to cope with the various effects of fuel poverty in the cold months. Whatever particular tactics they deployed, a considerable amount of time, effort, thought and money went into the business of coping with fuel poverty and ensuring that despite it, daily life went on as best it could. The residents of the Belgrave estate worked hard making decisions – sometimes more, sometimes less consciously – about how to live optimally in homes that, on account of being fuel poor, did not lend themselves to optimal living.

But just as it is a mistake to think that our participants sat back and accepted themselves as passive victims of fuel-poor circumstances, so too would it be a mistake to imagine that their heroic efforts resulted in success – in overcoming fuel poverty (or even in staying warm, dry and financially buoyant). Rather, their coping tactics gave rise to two highly problematic outcomes.
Making a house a home: Providing affordable warmth solutions for children and families living in fuel poverty.
3 The unintended outcomes of coping

a) The reproduction of disadvantage

First, the tactics people used to cope with one aspect of fuel poverty often undermined their efforts to cope with another aspect. In the attempt to stay warm people invested money in secondary heating devices (oil-filled radiators, blow heaters, halogen heaters, gas heaters, electric fires) and in the raft of additional extras required such as electric blankets, extra duvets, fleeces and hand warmers. While these efforts may have gone some way towards making people warmer, in turn they chipped away at household budgets that were already vulnerable – and in some cases extremely fragile – due to the disproportionate amount of income spent on energy. Further, these secondary heating systems had little automation and required significant planning and engagement by the adults in the home. People had to remember to turn heaters on an hour before bedtime to warm-up their children’s bedrooms and remember to turn them off shortly after children had gone to bed. They had to move portable heaters around to warm different parts of the house, and often had to get up an hour or so before they would otherwise have done in order to heat rooms before other family members arose. All of this could add to the stress that people already felt. As one mother described:

‘The storage heaters come on between 1.30am – 7am and emit from 7am, but they are cold by 6pm. The girls leave for school at 9am and return at 4pm. If it is cold then oil radiators are used throughout the day to maintain comfort, otherwise they are turned on and off as needed in winter from 5pm until bed time. Storage heaters are used the same at weekends but oil filled radiators are used differently depending on what’s going on in the home, whether the family are in or out.’

In the effort to keep warmth in the house and keep energy bills manageable, there was a tendency for many towards a relentless vigilance over shutting doors and switching off electrical devices. While this may have gone some way towards controlling the use of energy in the home, it also gave rise to a constant ‘nagging’ which in turn aggravated intra-household tensions that might already be running high because of the cold. In endeavouring to cope with the problem of damp, people spent significant amounts of time, effort and money on products and services, either to try and get rid of it altogether or to conceal it from view. While these efforts made a little difference in some cases, they also put further pressure on financial constraints and added to levels of frustration and stress. In attempting to cope with the household tensions triggered by the cold, some people would retreat to their bedrooms or even outside the home, and while this may have kept full-blown arguments at bay, it meant that people were not spending that time together as families, and it is hard to see how bonds could be formed or bridges built in these circumstances. In the effort to cover the cost of energy, some people would not use heating at all, and then end up back at square one – cold and miserable. Some parents would use their children’s money, or cut down and go without necessities to pay for energy, and this in turn would leave them feeling guilty and stressed and questioning their competence as parents.

The list goes on. Every action carried an unintended – negative – consequence. In trying to cope, people often ended up reproducing the disadvantages they suffered.
b) The tyranny of the small things

Second, taken together, the tactics that people resorted to in the effort to cope with the effects of fuel poverty somehow became more than the sum of their parts. Levels of micro-management over everyday life at home during winter could get so heightened that they appeared to become something of a tyranny – a tyranny of the small things. All of the little steps that people took to cope with the lack of affordable warmth – personally, socially, economically – would add up to an overall picture of life in the cold months being governed by the lack of affordable warmth. And with so much of their attention given over to the ‘small things’, it is hard to imagine how people had the resources left to cope with all of the other struggles, challenges and catastrophes that were thrown their way, let alone pursue their dreams.

During the course of this study we learned of a number of situations that participants had had to contend with, which were challenging, distressing or gruelling and in some cases incomprehensibly traumatic. Bullying (so severe that the family had relocated), parental disability, parental mental illness, hospitalisation, bereavement, periods in care, diagnoses of learning difficulties, teenage pregnancy, severe indebtedness, family breakdown and abuse – all of these and more were reported to us in the course of our conversations.

At first, it seemed that fuel poverty and these other hardships had little, if anything, to do with each other. But when we think holistically of peoples’ lives, they begin to connect. When we think in terms of the actual people who are trying to cope with the demands of keeping warm and dry in addition to surviving trauma or hardship, it becomes important to think of both. Fuel poverty and the coping tactics it requires are a drain on resources which could be spent coping with the big things in life – or even pursuing ambitions.

Would having an adequately heated home have prevented these other hardships? In most cases no. Would it have made a difference to people’s capacity to cope? Maybe. Would it have meant that everyday life was made more comfortable for people who were otherwise facing some of the most horrendous experiences we might imagine? Yes. And would it make it easier for people to follow their dreams instead of expending so much energy trying to satisfy this most basic of human needs? Possibly.

Our young participants have high hopes for their futures; they want to be airline pilots, lawyers, psychologists, computer programmers, teachers, parents, nursery assistants, care workers, soldiers and veterinary nurses. They want to contribute to their families and to wider society. They want the chance to make people proud. Having access to affordable warmth would play its part in supporting them to pursue these dreams.
Making a house a home: Providing affordable warmth solutions for children and families living in fuel poverty.
4 Intervening

In the winter of 2014 the Belgrave estate was connected to the national grid gas distribution network and households had new gas central heating systems installed. There was a brewing sense of excitement in the run-up to this event, as pavements were dug up, pipes installed and gas meters fitted. One woman actually bounced up and down clapping her hands when she talked about it, while others reported it to friends and family on social media. In the event, peoples’ expectations were not only met, they were surpassed. After a winter following the intervention, families reported greater satisfaction with their heating system performance and levels of warmth. They reported reduced rationing of energy and other essentials, reduced energy bills, greater budget flexibility and the ability to pay for treats now and again. They also reported improvements in family relationships.

Families could now keep their entire home warm more easily and many noted that they felt more in control of their heating, thus preventing waste and saving money. All 13 families that took part in our follow-up survey reported that they were now more satisfied with how well their home retained the heat after the intervention. As the families told us:

‘I can control the heat. I can have all heaters on if I want them. The kids can have their heating on whereas I couldn’t [before], I couldn’t afford to heat on the electric.’

‘I used to have to go up at half five to switch his [my son’s] radiator on to think, ‘Right, he’s going to go to bed at seven, then shut the door just to get his room warm for when he went up and it wasn’t even that warm. He used to wake up in the night saying he was cold, but he doesn’t do it, he sleeps right through now.’

‘I can put my heating on all day and it doesn’t eat away, whereas if I’d had my storage heaters on you actually saw the electricity meter going round and round about 100 miles an hour… So, you try turning it off as soon as possible, as soon as spring comes.’

‘It [storage heaters] was a lot of money that was every week, when you just think just on the electric and you were only heating one room it’s a ridiculous amount of money.’

‘The upstairs is lovely because we never had no heating upstairs in the bathroom either and we’re finding that the water… it’s hotter for longer because with no heating it used to get cold straight away.’

‘Oh yes, it’s [energy bills] halved. We’re putting £20 electric in and £20 gas.’
‘[Before central heating] it cost a lot more, a lot more. I was putting between £40 and £60 on the electric every week, whereas now I put £40 in both and it last me two, three weeks.’

The benefits of being able to achieve a warm home and enhanced control extend beyond the ability to control heat in individual rooms, enhanced comfort and more affordable energy bills. For many it meant improved relationships, uplifted moods and an increased sense of well-being, as well as more money for the small things often taken for granted, such as trips and being able to give pocket money. In the words of some of our study families:

‘I’ve noticed as well the kids have started having pocket money off us. Only £5 a week but I’ve managed to do that...’

‘Nobody’s moaning about, you know, ‘we’re freezing mum!’ We used to argue all the time, ‘mum we’re freezing’, ‘well, what can I do about it?’ ‘Put the heating on’, yes, but we can’t afford it’. ‘Well, just put it on for half an hour then.’

‘He [my son] has breathing difficulties. He hasn’t been so ill this winter; to be honest I don’t even think we’ve been to the doctors once this year. I think it must be the central heating because I mean we spend a lot of time in the house.’

As part of the intervention on the Belgrave estate, all households that gave permission (17 in total) received a follow-up call from NEA’s advice team, who ascertained households’ outstanding advice and support needs. This included discussion of whether people felt confident and able to control their new heating system efficiently, whether they understood other ways to use energy efficiently in the home, whether they were on the best energy deal for them, whether they might benefit from switching tariff or supplier and whether they would benefit from a referral to other forms of assistance, such as the Warm Home Discount and Priority Service Register. Nine households who requested further advice were then referred on to Tamworth Home Energy Advice Team – HEAT – and went on to receive a follow-up advice call.

This research suggests that households receiving fuel poverty interventions, such as those on the Belgrave estate, would benefit from encouragement to engage actively with other home energy services and programmes of support. For example, some respondents felt that because they had benefitted significantly from this scheme, they felt more inclined to look at other schemes and opportunities to access energy efficiency improvements for their homes. Adults told us:

‘It’s the advice, it’s the saving money, it’s the whole package.’

‘[Because of this scheme] you think, ‘Well, if that’s going to save me money then what else can you try and do save yourself more money,’ so yes you do look.’

Perhaps the best way to illustrate the difference that fuel poverty interventions can make is to return to the Williams’ family. We asked the children what it had been like in the house since the installation. Ryan and Keely competed with each other to find the best metaphor to describe coming home after school with the gas central heating in.
Keely said:

‘well it’s been like really warm and really hot. It’s like an explosion of fire.’

But Ryan trumped that:

‘well I feel like, that really the gas has changed my life basically because the heat – it used to be cold, you used to walk in with icicles coming from your nostrils and now you walk in from the cold, into the warmth, it just feels like the icicles have melted... it feels like I’m in a volcano... it’s like a ball of fire, lava... a volcano exploding’.

The house stays warmer for longer and the damp has almost gone – Amanda no longer has to wring out a soaking wet towel every morning, used overnight to soak up the condensation on the window sill in the bedrooms. Ryan has stopped coughing so much, and there was not a single asthma-related hospital trip the whole winter. Amanda’s psoriasis is more manageable and calms down faster. Paige’s feet have not gone blue. Amanda’s life is still a struggle – she makes do on very little – but she is not stressed or worried about her children being cold. They can control the heating and hot water for the first time. They can shower or bath when they like and they can have a whole bath not just half a bath, with hot water. Amanda does not have to run out of the bathroom ‘as fast as Usain Bolt’ to avoid freezing on the landing. They do not have to stay up until 1am waiting for their school uniforms to dry, and their clothes do not smell of damp. Stacy talks about the effort it used to take to do the smallest of things, whereas now she can just turn on the tap and do the washing up. The small things are not tyrannical anymore; they can assume their proper place in the household – presupposed, invisible and rightly taken for granted.

The Williams’ spend time downstairs now, watching television together or playing Monopoly. There is less complaining, less nagging. Amanda says she does not feel uptight anymore. And the children second this: ‘she’s been more nicer’. Keely says. ‘When we didn’t have the heating she was a bit mean, nippy like, nippy and shouty’. They all rush to emphasise that their mum was never cold hearted – just cold. But now she is warm and warm hearted. Amanda says ‘it’s that warm now I’m just happy... It’s a happy household.’ And it feels like home. She says ‘I’m just thankful for the affordable warmth that they’ve put it in for us, seriously’.

Last winter, with the gas central heating, Amanda spent on average £80 a month on electricity and £50 a month on gas through her monthly payment plan - instead of the £400 a month she used to spend on electric alone. She can buy more food, better quality food and meat, and give the children ‘proper’ meals – the home-cooked dinners that she feels it is her duty to provide. They now have a family roast on Sundays and Amanda can give her children pocket money each week instead of taking money from them. She is even thinking of taking them on holiday next summer – just to a caravan or something. She says ‘I would love to do it... It would just be nice for them to go and run on the beach’. They have never been on holiday.

We ask about the installation. Amanda says it was ‘brilliant’. The communications with Affordable Warmth Solutions were ‘great’. The workmen were ‘lovely – they were polite, they kept time and were tidy’ – and these things matter; just because your house is cold does not mean people are allowed to be rude, late or messy. We asked Amanda what it was like at Christmas – their first with central heating. And here is what she said:

‘It’s cosy now... Christmas was amazing, it was really lovely, because I love my Christmas... it was more, what’s the word, homely... the percolator of coffee going on, and we had cinnamon buns and we had my mum over... so
the house smelt of coffee and cinnamon and it was just... warm.’

During the follow-up phase of this study Stacy sent us her feedback form and had this to say:

‘I think that [having the gas central heating installed] ... was a good idea. It has helped many people in our area and made my family come together at night with the heating on, watching films. I don’t feel so isolated anymore. Thank you.’

Intervening to alleviate fuel poverty enables people to keep warm and dry in their homes, and in better health. But it goes a lot further than that. Intervening helps to alleviate stress and anxiety around the lack of affordable warmth and thereby helps to give families a fighting chance to get on. It allows people to use financial resources in the household for things other than energy and the absolute bare essentials. It enables them to have more control over everyday life in the winter, instead of having their lives governed by the tyranny of the small things. It goes some way towards enabling people to thrive. It can help to make a house a home.
5 Conclusions and insights for policy and practice

There are a number of key conclusions emerging from this study:

- The effects of fuel poverty are far-reaching, spanning different areas of life (personal, social, economic) and penetrating deep into the rhythms and patterns of daily living.

- Attempts to cope with any given aspect of fuel poverty often result in aggravating other aspects of the problem, and people thereby unwittingly undermine their own efforts to manage.

- The financial and emotional resources required to cope with the effects of fuel poverty leave inadequate room for pursuing dreams or for coping with life’s other hardships.

- The effects of intervening to alleviate fuel poverty are far-reaching, with the potential to break cycles of negative consequence and foster positive outcomes in emotional and social, as well as economic, terms.

- Community-wide energy efficiency schemes get people talking about their area and experiences of the scheme. The attitudes towards the scheme displayed in these interactions can be positive or negative, but generally they have the potential to strengthen community bonds, develop social capital and may prompt further community discussion and engagement with available programmes of support. Schemes such as these can also provide added impetus for existing community groups (or individuals) to participate, enhancing procedural justice and increasing confidence about taking further action to improve the local area.

- Evaluation and beneficiary participation in assessing the experience of interventions and resulting outcomes are valuable. They are critical for demonstrating the impact of such programmes for households, scheme delivery practitioners and policy makers. They can give further impetus for improvements in the delivery and cost effectiveness of schemes.

There are also a number of insights for policy and practice arising from this study:

It is important that fuel poverty policy, and the programmes designed to address the problem, better reflect the needs of, and risks to, families with dependent children. As one of the household types most at risk of fuel poverty, and in acknowledgement of the multiple harms that fuel poverty can cause families, greater efforts are required to ensure that fuel poverty policies are expanded to provide support to the most vulnerable families. This includes policies that provide capital measures to improve the energy efficiency of homes, and those that provide energy bill and income support, for example the Warm Home Discount Scheme [WHDS] and the Winter Fuel Payment.

Currently, a £140 electricity bill discount is paid automatically to low-income older households that qualify for the WHDS. For other vulnerable and low income electricity customers (not of pensionable age) the one-off payment of £140 is not paid automatically but is available to those who apply. This policy is paid for through a levy on all energy consumers and is delivered across Great Britain by obligated energy suppliers, but is due to expire in 2016. In light of the far reaching consequences of living in fuel poverty for families, as illustrated by this research, we recommend that the WHDS is both extended and expanded. In particular, a continuation of the WHDS should seek to extend current data sharing powers to provide the automatic electricity discount to all low-income families, bringing them into the core group. A continuation of the WHDS should also seek to ensure that all energy suppliers are obligated to deliver the core group rebate. It is critical that the Government provides early clarity that the scheme will run until the end of this Parliament, as this is
Making a house a home: Providing affordable warmth solutions for children and families living in fuel poverty

important for industry initiatives that could benefit off-grid households who face high energy costs but may not benefit from assistance under the Fuel Poverty Gas Network Extension Scheme (FPGNES).

Gas Distribution Network (GDN) companies are currently incentivised to connect eligible fuel-poor households to the gas network under the FPGNES. Ofgem will now encourage GDNs to connect 18% more households (91,203 households) up until 2021. This research has highlighted how critical it is that gas extension programmes, such as the FPGNES can also deliver simultaneous and complementary ‘in-house’ measures – such as new and efficient heating systems. As such, GDNs must be able to access a reliable source of funding for such integration in order to realise maximum benefits to families, like those on the Belgrave estate.

Following the loss of the publicly funded energy efficiency scheme (Warm Front) in 2013, the Energy Company Obligation (ECO) continues to be the main energy efficiency programme for low-income households and communities in England. The ECO is funded through a levy on energy consumer bills and is also delivered across the rest of Great Britain by obligated energy suppliers. The debate over the future and shape of the successor to ECO has been intensifying, prompted by an increasing concern among the supply chain that the targets for the current phase of the scheme will be met well in advance of March 2017, possibly as early as spring 2016. As a result, DECC are in the process of reviewing domestic energy efficiency policy with a view to making relevant announcements in autumn 2015. In response, The Children’s Society and NEA note that ECO has not, to date, aligned itself well with the FPGNES scheme, resulting in poor access by GDNs to funding for complementary, yet essential, ‘in-house’ heating and/or insulation measures, like those detailed in this report which can deliver real and wide-ranging benefits to families and communities. In order to respond to some of these challenges, The Children’s Society and NEA believe that the future ECO must be ring-fenced and targeted at fuel-poor households, particularly low-income families in energy inefficient properties.

Further to this, the new Central Heating Fund (CHF), introduced in 2014 to support the installation of first time heating systems and ancillary insulation measures, provides an excellent opportunity to align with the FPGNES. It is critical however that the CHF be expanded and funding committed year on year to align with the duration of the FPGNES, ending in 2021. A key requirement for the new scheme would be for new connections under the FPGNES to include basic insulation alongside new efficient heating systems, where technically feasible. This is fundamental to the full affordability outcomes which could be realised by any new gas connection and is also critical to ensure GDNs activity is consistent with DECC’s Heat Strategy.

Coupled with the development of an effective and reliable framework for GDNs to fund in-house measures through focusing ECO on those that need the support most and additional programmes such as the CHF, a new interactive mapping solution for off gas grid homes has been developed through an effective partnership between Government, industry and Ofgem. The online mapping tool could ease the development of community gas connections, such as the one described in this report, and GDNs can use this tool to target these activities. In addition, Ofgem should do more to recognise the cost efficiency of community gas connections and encourage GDNs to invest in these schemes as opposed to individual gas connections.

Finally, so that households can derive maximum benefit from new efficient heating systems, it is critical that families receive comprehensive advice, particularly where the installation is replacing the main heating source and new controls are installed. Similarly, any cost savings that are expected
Making a house a home: Providing affordable warmth solutions for children and families living in fuel poverty

to accrue to the household (accounting for savings taken in comfort) should be tailored, and advice provided about the most suitable and cost-effective energy tariffs and payment options. There should also be an offer of follow-up visits/calls for those customers who need further help after the installation. Where advice of this nature is provided directly, the practical results are hugely positive – particularly when problems or queries arise post-installation or when households may be more receptive to further advice. It is important not only to ensure that households get the most out of the measures installed, but that they are confident they have been given the opportunity to ask questions and learn how to optimise the use of the measures installed. This way, confidence in the programme can be enhanced and therefore the opportunities to amplify the benefits of the initiative and take-up can be improved.

Key NEA and The Children’s Society policy recommendations:

- The Warm Home Discount Scheme (WHDS) should be extended over the course of this Parliament and expanded to all energy suppliers, so that all low income families receive an automatic rebate on their electricity bills.
- Gas Distribution Networks (GDNs) must be able to access a reliable source of funding for ‘in house’ energy efficiency measures. Therefore, available funds, such as the future supplier obligation, should be ring-fenced and targeted at fuel-poor households. Simultaneously, the new Central Heating Fund (CHF) should be expanded and adequately resourced to align with the current Gas Distribution Price Control period.
- Insulation measures should be installed alongside new efficient heating systems, where technically feasible.
- GDNs should use the new gas connection mapping tool to target their activities. Ofgem should do more to recognise the cost efficiency of community gas connections and encourage GDNs to invest in these schemes.
- Households with new efficient heating system installations must receive comprehensive advice. This is particularly the case where installations are replacing main heating sources and new controls are installed.
Making a house a home: Providing affordable warmth solutions for children and families living in fuel poverty

Endnotes

1 This opening narrative takes the form of a composite case study, used primarily as a means of protecting participant’s anonymity. It draws on a number of real cases (and uses real quotes), but by pulling their information together into a ‘composite’ household makes it difficult to identify any real household or its members. In this composite case study we draw on three households whose situations are reflective of the wider sample in many key ways. We have ensured that the examples and details we emphasise are not unique, nor the most extreme, but reflect the experiences of many families in our broader sample. All names in this report have been changed.

2 www.tamworth.gov.uk/sites/default/files/community_docs/Belgrave_Profile_2012.pdf

3 Fuel poverty is assessed in England using the Low Income, High Costs measure. Under this definition, a household is fuel poor if their energy costs are above the national median and in meeting those costs the household falls below the official poverty line (60% median income). In this study, we take a broad approach to the conceptualisation of fuel poverty, understanding it more widely as energy vulnerability, where households for reasons of age, health and low income are exposed to the risk of fuel poverty and unable to keep their homes warm at an affordable cost.

4 A skin condition that causes red, flaky patches of skin, which can be triggered by stress or anxiety and can become itchy and sore (www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Psoriasis/Pages/Introduction.aspx, www.psoriasis-association.org.uk/pages/view/about-psoriasis).


6 Department for Communities and Local Government (2014) English Housing Survey (and fuel poverty data set).

7 This categorisation is intended as an analytical and narrative device – clearly, in reality the categories themselves are linked as are the effects that each encompasses, however they provide a useful way of beginning to understand, and write about, everyday life for people living in fuel poor homes.

8 While some declared the cold to be a welcome excuse not to do homework, or that they did not complete homework for reasons quite separate from the cold, some young people recounted experiences of genuine debilitation stemming from the cold and voiced concern about these.