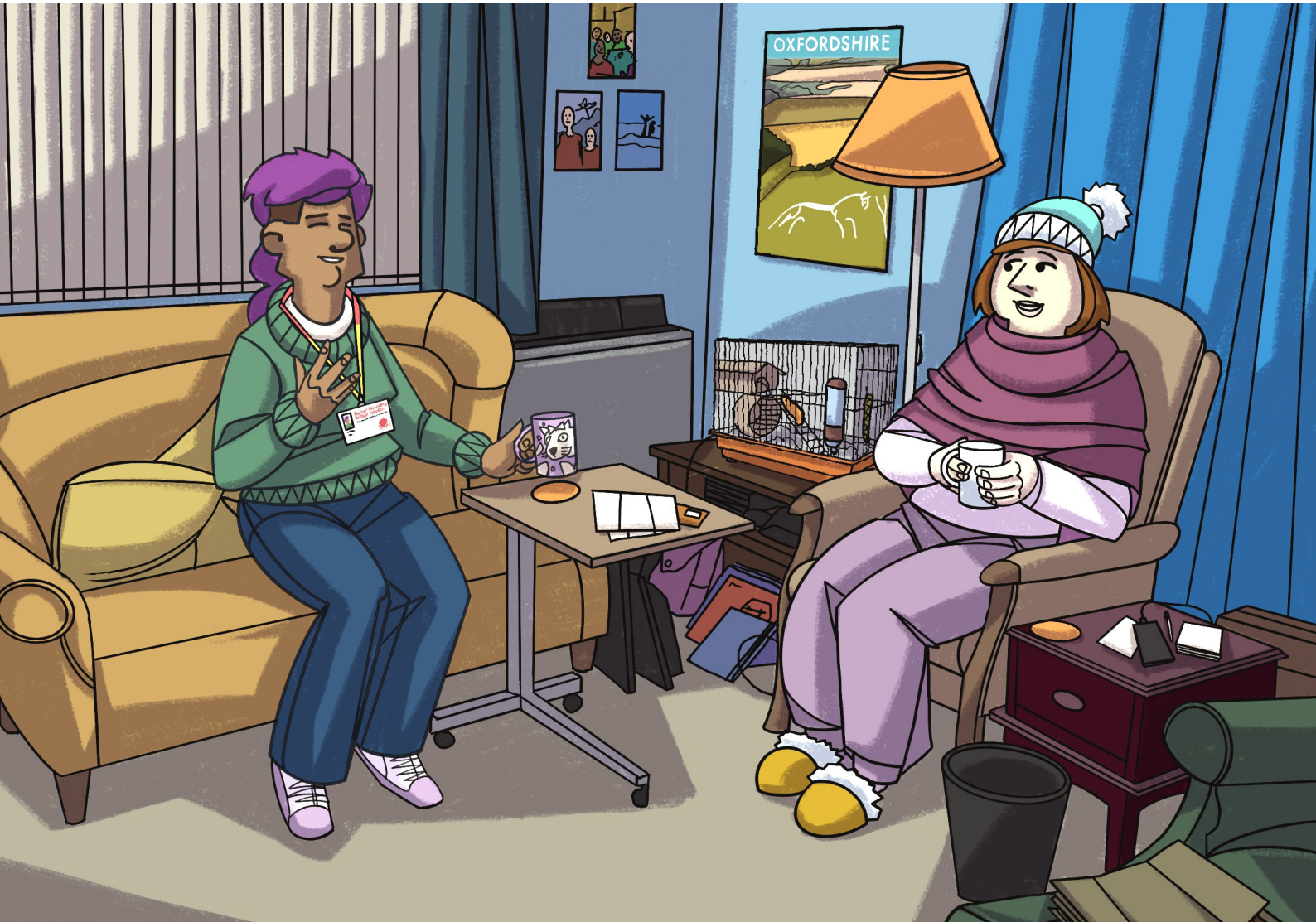




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SUSTAINABLE HOUSING
& URBAN STUDIES UNIT



Better Housing Better Health

A qualitative study of energy
advice and support in Oxfordshire

Graeme Sherriff
David Young

April 2024





The Sustainable Housing & Urban Studies Unit (SHUSU) is a dedicated multi-disciplinary research and consultancy centre in the School of Health and Society at the University of Salford. It brings together researchers drawn from a range of disciplines including social policy, housing, mobility, urban geography, environmental management, psychology, social care, and social work.



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This research has been funded by Oxfordshire County Council. Whilst, the Council have been involved in the design and delivery of the project, the content of this report, including the conclusions and recommendations, are the independent work of the academic team.

Original illustrations by Andrea Motta - <https://omsalvej.com>

This report is available online at: <https://salford-repository.worktribe.com/output/2674439>

Better Housing Better Health: A qualitative study of energy advice and support in Oxfordshire

Dr Graeme Sherriff
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Foreword



Warm, safe, secure homes which enable people to live independently are an a key building block of health. Historically, housing has not always been a priority for action by the health and care system and evidence has tended to focus on numbers and not on the experience of people living in poor quality homes. This report captures the powerful stories of our most vulnerable residents and their experiences living in their homes.

In Oxfordshire we have been piloting the use of home visits provided by the Better Housing Better Health service to offer increased support to residents experiencing fuel poverty. The qualitative evaluation of the service presented here offers valuable insights into the impact of the service, alongside the quantitative data collected in an accompanying report. This combined approach strengthens our understanding of what works and what doesn't when providing energy efficiency advice and how the service provides support not just to residents but to the wider health and care system.

The report provides insight into the positive impact home visits can have on a resident's emotional well-being. Importantly, it identifies the added value of an in

person assessment of housing conditions and support to address a range of complex needs for more vulnerable residents which cannot be delivered by providing advice remotely on the telephone. The report also acknowledges that the service can be enhanced to address ongoing challenges. Closing the feedback loop to referral partners and ensuring a range of relevant and practical support to residents, in addition to advice, are two key areas for improvement.

The learnings presented here have wider implications as the findings suggest that other services addressing complex needs may also benefit from a face-to-face approach.

I commend the team for its work on this important evaluation. The findings will serve as a valuable resource as we continue to prevent poor health through improving housing conditions and its impact on the lives of Oxfordshire's residents.

Ansaf Azhar
Director of Public Health
Oxfordshire County Council

Executive Summary

Better Housing Better Health

The Better Housing Better Health (BHBH) service is provided by the National Energy Foundation (NEF) across Oxfordshire and other locations in the south of England. Delivering advice and support to residents to help them stay warm and healthy in their homes, the service has been running since 2013. In 2022, home visits were introduced into the service with the aim of better supporting residents and tailoring advice more closely to their needs.

The context: housing and fuel poverty

BHBH can be understood as part of ongoing efforts to provide people with the information and means they need to manage their energy use more effectively. Alongside other services in the UK (Section 1.2), BHBH is part of a drive to reduce levels of fuel poverty and mitigate the impacts on health and wellbeing. Fuel poverty is understood to stem from low incomes, poor-quality buildings, and expensive energy and is heightened for those with particular vulnerabilities such as health conditions that are affected by cold or damp conditions.

To address fuel poverty, BHBH aims to improve the quality of buildings by providing support to make improvements to homes and to help with financial challenges by offering support in connection with supplier issues, tariffs, and energy debts.

This study

For this research we have conducted a set of qualitative interviews with 13 householders who have received support from BHBH and with 13 stakeholders who have been involved in the delivery of the service or worked in the wider network of support organisations in Oxfordshire (Section 2.1). We have also referred to transcripts from BHBH delivery meetings. These provided a window on the prior development of BHBH, shed light on the challenges faced by the staff team, and helped to inform the design of the interview question guides.

Through this analysis of in-depth accounts of householder and stakeholder experiences, this qualitative piece of work complements a partner study of health impacts [1] that provided quantitative data on health and healthcare use.

In the interviews, householders were asked about how comfortable they were in their home; any difficulties they had with energy, heating, and cooling and how this affected their health; what support they had had from BHBH; how they found it; to what extent it helped them; and any challenges they had in responding to the advice they were given. Stakeholder interviewees were asked about their understanding of housing conditions and challenges; the involvement of themselves and their organisation in helping people with energy-related challenges; and their experiences of referring clients into BHBH (Section 2.3).

Energy and housing in Oxfordshire

Poor-quality homes and financial stress have an impact upon health, and householders and their carers adopted coping strategies for dealing with their experiences of fuel poverty (Chapter 3).

- Cold, hot, draughty, and damp conditions affected the lives of the interviewees both inside and outside the home, e.g. health impacts experienced whilst at work. Householders made connections to the state of their home, including lack of insulation and the presence of damp (Section 3.1).
- The conditions affected by indoor conditions included long Covid, Crohn's disease, arthritis, and fibromyalgia, and the limitations placed on their lives by these conditions in combination with cold, heat, and damp had a profound impact upon the wellbeing of householders and limited what they could do in the home (Section 3.2).

- A further impact upon health was that of the experience of seeking support from different organisations, whether local authorities, housing associations, or support agencies: something that interviewees found stressful and exhausting (Section 3.4).
- Householders had been affected by recent energy price rises, and this had added to their financial stress. This meant having to make some difficult decisions about priorities, indicating a tension between immediate needs and medium-term self-care. Carers had reported using their 'holiday grant' on energy costs, for example, and one householder interviewee heated their child's room but not the living room (Section 3.3).
- Whilst householders sought support with energy costs, this was not the only starting point, or 'trigger', for them seeking support. Sometimes it related to more general financial difficulties, and it was the advisor who recognised that energy might be a part of the household budget on which savings could be made. Another trigger was the diagnosis of long-term conditions, such as cancer, which prompted people to reassess their financial outgoings (Section 3.3).

Home visits

Home visits are an important part of the BHBH service, a way of providing a personal service to clients with the opportunity to focus on the home and its heating system, as well as to talk to householders about their wellbeing in a setting familiar to them.

- The majority of interviewees appreciated the home visits. In one case the householder felt that the information could have been delivered more efficiently by email, but this was an exception and will have reflected the nature of their issue and the help they required.
- There is a practical benefit to householders of having home visits, relating to the cost and time implications if they had had to go to a community centre or office instead. Less tangibly, there is less associated stigma in comparison with being seen going to a public place for help (Section 4.1).
- Householders described feeling supported and listened to and felt that the advisor had a good sense of their home and could appreciate what they were experiencing living there. This can be contrasted to phone consultations, after which some interviewees felt that they had not been taken seriously or that their housing association had not accepted the extent of their problems. This manifested in the form of a boost in self-esteem and feeling cared about and supported (Section 4.2).

- Stakeholders valued being able to conduct home visits and, when they were not able to, having been able to refer to BHBH to carry them out on their behalf. Like the householders, they valued the potential for the visit to reveal the reality of the experiences of living in the home. Householders might not give an accurate impression: they may not recognise the severity of issues; they may be unwilling to report them, for fear of causing problems with their landlord or out of embarrassment; they may not want to bother the advisor; or they may have simply got used to the problems being there. The words 'everything's fine' could therefore belie a range of problems that would need addressing (Section 4.3).

Impact on householders

It is difficult to measure changes in health in the short to medium term, especially in relation to long-term conditions. It is also difficult to reliably attribute any changes to particular measures. Nevertheless, the interviewees shared insights into the effects of their home on their wellbeing and the impacts of the service on them.

- On the whole, interviewees appreciated advice in relation to energy. There were some 'basics' of energy efficiency that they were not aware of, and they felt empowered with information on how to save energy and were able to make some small changes. This evidences the importance of fostering a basic level of energy literacy (Section 5.2).
- In some cases, people were able to make some changes that reduced energy consumption, such as installing thermal blinds or turning down the water temperature, but also often felt constrained in what they could change. This stemmed from feeling that the changes they could make were not enough to significantly cut costs (e.g. being advised to wear an extra layer), from having to liaise with their landlord to make changes to the house, from being unable to make or afford the suggested changes (e.g. installing blinds or fixing windows), and from being concerned about the impact on family life and household members (Section 5.3).
- There was some evidence of householders feeling warmer as a result of changes. The main impact reported in the interviews was on mental health: feeling listened to and supported. Knowing that a service like BHBH existed helped people to feel supported (Section 5.4).

Impact on networks

BHBH complements the wider network of organisations offering support and advice in Oxfordshire (Chapter 6). To some extent, this reflects the additional capacity – more advisors and organisations able to provide more support – but it also relates to the particular expertise BHBH offers on energy and the specific role of performing home visits. For some stakeholders, BHBH had become the ‘go-to’ organisation on energy and related issues.

- Other organisations appreciated having BHBH to refer into when they encountered clients having issues with energy. Energy was not a subject for which other organisations tended to have specialist staff, and having BHBH available meant they could focus on their strengths. Whilst BHBH provided some continuity, across the other organisations specialisms such as this could vary as volunteers and staff come and go.
- BHBH was seen to be able to be more proactive than some other organisations, and this helped them to take into account the bigger picture in relation to clients’ lives.
- BHBH has the capacity to do home visits and to liaise with energy companies, both activities that are particularly time-consuming.
- BHBH also has knowledge of and access to sources of funding and support that other organisations often do not.

Challenges in delivery

In addition to the challenges faced by householders in implementing advice:

- BHBH staff rely on other organisations to refer into the service, so it is important to maintain the profile of the service across Oxfordshire. Organisations varied in how they approached referrals, but it is fair to say that the network of support was characterised by informal approaches such as seeing posters in the workplace and consulting colleagues verbally in the office. This approach, in contrast to something like a

referral flowchart, meant that it was important to be proactive in keeping BHBH at the front of people’s minds (Section 7.1).

- Following a change in working patterns since the Covid-19 pandemic, with more remote working, these informal approaches were not as effective, as they relied on people sharing physical spaces. Organisations were inventing new ways of sharing information, such as digital noticeboards, but gave the impression that these approaches were still bedding in (Section 7.1).
- Stakeholders supporting householders in different ways commented on the limitations of the support they could give. Often the fundamental problem is that householders lack money and, whilst they may be able to arrange some savings on energy bills, they cannot raise incomes and therefore cannot address the fundamental causes of poverty and poor housing (Section 7.2).
- Reflecting these concerns, stakeholders also expressed frustration that they were constrained in what they could do in terms of physical changes to the home. They could not physically make changes to the home, and householders were often unable to implement or afford changes. Where landlords needed to be involved, it was often not possible to engage them successfully. Sometimes, advisors found themselves engaging with the same complex support systems as householders (Section 7.2).

Headline findings

- Continue to fund the BHBH service..
- Continue the provision of home visits..
- Cement partnership working processes.
- Focus on individual needs and communicate limitations of the service.
- Expand the service to reflect challenges .
- Take a holistic approach to monitoring.

Headline Implications

The Better Housing Better Health (BHBH) service is provided by the National Energy Foundation (NEF) across Oxfordshire and other locations in the south of England. Delivering advice and support to residents to help them stay warm and healthy in their homes, the service has been running since 2013. In 2022, home visits were introduced into the service with the aim of better supporting residents and tailoring advice more closely to their needs. The following are headline findings from the qualitative research detailed in this report.

1 Continue to fund the BHBH service

Our research has identified complex needs within Oxfordshire and evidenced the intimate connection between housing quality, home heating and cooling, and energy provision. We have also highlighted the wellbeing impacts of the stress of managing household budgets and engaging with landlords and other actors in the housing sector. The ongoing role of BHBH in providing assistance, support, and reassurance is therefore substantial.

2 Continue the provision of home visits

Home visits have important advantages that justify the added cost and time commitment. These are interpersonal, such as residents feeling listened to, understood, and validated by face-to-face contact. They are also practical, such as a reduction in travel costs for the householder. The ability of the home visitor to observe issues around the home and ask follow-up questions enables issues to be addressed more effectively.

3 Cement partnership working processes

BHBH plays a vital role within a wider ecosystem of support in Oxfordshire. In a post-Covid working environment characterised by more online and remote working, it can be challenging to maintain the diversity and immediacy of the network. The presence of BHBH could be cemented with regular meetings, weekly updates, and shared systematic ways of understanding the service in relation to other services and referral opportunities (e.g. an updated online platform or shared flowchart). It will therefore continue to be important to inform other organisations about BHBH's role and its potential to complement their support.

4 Focus on individual needs, communicate limitations

When supporting householders, BHBH advisors deal with a diverse range of issues and priorities. In some cases, householders' needs could be met in a straightforward way. In others, there were pressing issues that BHBH could not solve because they were beyond its resources, outside its remit, or subject to broader barriers. It is therefore important to both personalise advice and support and build on partnerships within the wider network of support in Oxfordshire.

5 Expand the service to reflect challenges

We have described the difficulties faced by householders in making changes to their homes and their routines. These are multiple, subjective, and complex. For example, our research identified the following barriers for residents that had a knock-on impact on service delivery: lack of income, health issues, landlord inaction, and an inability to act on advice (e.g. lack of DIY skills or tools). This highlights the value of expanding the programme or forming partnerships with other schemes in order to offer practical support with tasks such as installing blinds and other measures. Tenants reported issues with landlords to be a barrier to change, and there would therefore be value to developing the service to more effectively engage with landlords. These additions should however not be at the expense of the provision of basic energy advice to householders.

6 Take a holistic approach to monitoring

We found a number of primary, secondary, and wider outcomes, as set out in our logic diagram (page 30). To ensure that service development is evidence-based, it is important to monitor and report tangible and less tangible outcomes, such as householders feeling valued and supported.

1. Introduction

1.1 This study

The Better Housing Better Health (BHBH) service is provided by the National Energy Foundation (NEF) across Oxfordshire and other locations in the south of England. The service delivers advice and support to residents to help them stay warm and well in their homes. The service has been running since 2013¹, and from 2022 home visits were introduced with the aim of better supporting residents and more closely tailoring advice to their needs.

This study investigated BHBH in Oxfordshire using a set of qualitative interviews with householders receiving support through the service and with stakeholders involved in the delivery of the service or working in the wider network of support organisations in Oxfordshire. It complements an associated quantitative study of health impacts [1] through the use of in-depth accounts of experiences of the project that reflect on the impact of the project upon both householders and the existing network of support, as well as the challenges experienced during delivery.

1.2 BHBH in context

Since 2013, BHBH has provided support to at least 6975 households in Oxfordshire. The service can be understood as part of ongoing efforts to provide people with the information and means to more effectively manage their energy use and costs, albeit activities that have been inconsistent over time and geography [2]. The UK Government funded the Energy Saving Trust (EST) to coordinate a regionally coordinated network of energy advice centres, but this was replaced in 2012 with a telephone service, which was replaced in 2018 with a Government website [2], leaving a lack of a coordinated nationwide programme [3].

The BHBH service and others like it respond to growing awareness of the implications of cold homes and financial stress for mental and physical health. Some projects, such as Moving Together in the Western Isles of Scotland, make explicit connections through social-prescribing-style approaches [4], [5]. Others make direct connections to specific conditions, such as Changes4Warmth in Stoke-on-Trent, which focused on mental health [6].

Energy advice and support is a response to concerns about fuel poverty [7], a condition whereby people struggle to pay for energy services such as heating or, after they have paid for those services, they have to cut costs from other parts of the household budget. The health implications of being in cold and damp homes are wide-ranging and include strokes, respiratory conditions, and cardiovascular diseases. Wider impacts include the mental health impact of the stress of living in cold homes,

managing stretched budgets, and living in debt, as well as the implications for family life, such as children not having a warm quiet space to do homework. Fuel poverty is understood to stem from a set of factors: low incomes, poor-quality buildings that are difficult to heat, and expensive energy. To this list we can also add vulnerability, as individual circumstances may mean greater need for heating services: for example, health conditions such as arthritis and COPD mean people require warmth to avoid pain, unemployed people are more likely to be dependent on their home for more of their time, and people with learning difficulties may struggle to engage with smart technologies and online tariffs.

There is a set of responses available to address fuel poverty. *Retrofit* describes improvements to homes, heating systems, and other technologies. *Financial support* includes temporary measures such as fuel vouchers and one-off Government payments, as well as ongoing support such as the Warm Homes Discount. *Energy advice* can focus on changes in behaviour in the home, such as closing curtains and reducing the thermostat, and it can also engage with retrofit and financial support by helping people look at options for improving their home: examples could include sourcing funding for loft insulation or a new boiler.

Taken together, these can be understood as household energy efficiency interventions. Research has highlighted the need for a targeted approach that recognises that low-income and older groups and other vulnerable people are usually most affected by rising electricity costs [8]. A review study linked improvements in housing with a range of outcomes encompassing general health, disposable income, food and diet, reducing time off work and school, and a long-term impact on education and employment [9].

Research on energy advice has tended to highlight the value of such schemes whilst also convincingly arguing that housing quality and energy costs are subject to wider social and economic forces. That is, energy advice is unlikely to be sufficient on its own [2]: focusing at the scale of the household risks detracting from larger scale issues, such as energy price rises [10].

1.3 This report

We begin in Chapter 3 by outlining the methodology. In Chapters 4 to 7 we explore the findings in relation to energy and housing, home visits, the impact on householders and stakeholders, and challenges in delivery. We draw the study together with a discussion of cross-cutting themes (Chapter 8) and conclusions (Chapter 9). In Chapter 9, we provide a logic diagram to illustrate the impacts of BHBH and similar services.

¹ In different forms: originally called 'Affordable Warmth Network' and renamed to BHBH in 2016. The pilot of home visits began in 2022.

2. Methodology

2.1 Overview

This is a qualitative study that draws on three datasets:

- A. 13 interviews with householders who have received support through BHBH;
- B. 13 interviews with stakeholders, by which we mean people working in organisations in some way connected with BHBH and offering support to communities in Oxfordshire; and
- C. 10 transcripts from coordination meetings at which staff working directly on BHBH, including energy advisors, discussed current activities and challenges.

Group A were included in the study in order to explore the experiences of householders in relation to the project and, in particular, to understand any difficulties they faced with regard to housing and health and the extent to which BHBH was able to help them. We also sought to elicit their views on the nature and extent of the support and whether it was appropriate for them.

Group B were included since BHBH was intended not only to reach householders but also to contribute to the ecosystem of support available across Oxfordshire. It was therefore important to understand how other organisations saw the project and the reasons for, and extent of, their interaction with it.

Group C is an unusual but valuable component. In the period before the research team were appointed, Oxfordshire County Council had recorded these meetings so that the researchers could look back on the prior development of the project and be informed by these evolving discussions. The transcripts are referred to directly in some of the following chapters, and they were also useful at the stage of research design in relation to writing interview questions.

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with groups A and B. All householder interviews were conducted over the phone, and stakeholder interviews consisted of a combination of Teams video, phone, and in-person interviews in Oxfordshire. All interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription agency and imported into NVivo qualitative analysis software for thematic coding. Excerpts from the interviews are used to provide evidence in the following chapters. Interviews

are given an alphanumeric identifier in order to protect anonymity; householders are labelled with (Hx) and stakeholders with (Sx).

2.2 Recruitment

Group A were recruited by means of letters sent by Oxfordshire County Council. These contained a brief description of the project and an invitation to take part in an interview with the offer of a £25 shopping voucher as a thank you for taking part. The research team looked through an anonymised database of participants and selected a sample that would be diverse across key demographic characteristics, including gender, ethnicity, age, and housing tenure, and also took account of what was known about the severity of their health and energy problems. Thirty letters were sent out on 19th July 2023, 12 on 12th September, and 51 on 28th September. BHBH staff conducting follow-up telephone calls in September 2023 asked householders if they would like to have their details passed on to take part in the research. Recipients were asked to contact the research team by email or phone. A further interviewee was recruited at an information event in Oxford Library in November. This process resulted in six interviews being conducted in August and September and a further seven in October and November. Of the interviewees, five were male and eight female.

Group B were recruited in two phases. The initial phase, consisting of five interviews in July and August, helped to inform the development of the research as a whole by providing a better understanding of the position of BHBH in relation to other services in Oxfordshire. The dialogue with stakeholders continued through a second phase consisting of a further eight interviews in October, November, and December. Potential interviewees were emailed directly by Oxfordshire County Council, and the research team followed up to schedule the interviews. The sample was determined through conversation with Oxfordshire County Council, who could advise on a selection of partners who could comment on a range of different issues relating to the service. The final selection of interviewees was determined by the research team.

2.3 Interview foci

During the semi-structured interviews, householders were prompted to talk about:

- their home and how they felt about it in relation to comfort, including whether they felt they could keep warm and/or cool throughout the year;
- their health, any conditions they had, and the ways in which their indoor environment might have an effect on health and wellbeing;
- how they felt about their energy use and related expenditure and any impacts on wellbeing, such as financial stress;
- the impact of any energy-related issues on what they did in the home: e.g., they may not have cooked as much as they would like to, or they may have lived mostly in one room;
- their engagement with BHBH, including the support they had and what form(s) it took, and to what extent it was able to help them;
- what they had been able to do following the BHBH home visit and any challenges they had faced in responding to the advice they were provided with; and
- their thoughts about BHBH at a general level.

During the semi-structured interviews, stakeholders were prompted to talk about:

- their understanding of the challenges facing householders in relation to their day-to-day experiences of energy and their efforts to improve their homes;
- the role of the interviewee and their organisation in the provision of advice and support in Oxfordshire and their connection to the BHBH project;
- the extent to which energy issues featured in their work with householders and how they approached these; and
- why, when, and how they referred their clients to BHBH and their experiences of this process.

2.4 Challenges

There were a number of challenges in securing a suitable sample for this research. We secured fewer householder interviews than originally anticipated. This reflects a general difficulty in recruiting for research, particularly amongst vulnerable communities whose health challenges may mean they have to carefully ration time and energy. It can also reflect issues of trust in authorities and a sense of stigma in talking about severe difficulties in the home. O'Brien et al [11] discuss such difficulties and note that vulnerable populations may be suspicious of researchers or may have had prior negative experiences with research. In this study, a flexible approach was followed: we balanced the shortfall in householder interviews with more interviews from stakeholders (Group B).

Another challenge in delivering the research and analysing the data related to householder experiences of energy and interventions. Householders cannot reasonably be expected to recall all the details of their experiences and, in particular, exactly what work has been conducted on their homes, when it took place, and which agencies were responsible. This is especially the case for those in rented accommodation, whether private or social. We addressed this by ensuring that we asked for details about the services householders received and used this information to check that this was consistent with what BHBH offers. When there was ambiguity, we considered the activities and qualities they talked about: even if a home visit may not have been performed as part of BHBH, the householder could still provide evidence on the value of a home visit.

3. Energy and housing in Oxfordshire

Householders described ways in which the condition of their homes affected their comfort and wellbeing. In some cases, this aggravated particular physical and mental health conditions. Householders had adopted techniques for coping with both cold and hot weather. Sometimes they found conditions debilitating, with the effect of limiting their home and family life. Recent energy price increases had added to financial stress and made it more difficult for interviewees to maintain a comfortable home. Despite pursuing sometimes complex and lengthy processes, householders struggled to secure support to improve their homes and therefore welcomed the assistance that BHBH was able to provide.

3.1 Housing quality

Our discussions with householders in Oxfordshire add to the evidence base on the relationship between housing and wellbeing, emphasising the extent to which poor quality of housing can make it difficult to be comfortable indoors and evidencing the impact of this on home life and health. This not only provides a useful baseline for initiatives such as BHBH but also evidences a continued need for support to be provided to householders on issues relating to housing and health.

In both cases below, the interviewees referred to their experiences in hot and cold weather, noting poor-quality insulation and, in the first, the presence of gaps through which draughts enter the house:

Especially last winter, when it was getting really cold, it was – our front door, I could see light, so I knew that it was coming in, but it was gaps everywhere, and so that proved to be an issue, both in the winter and in the summer. In terms of the summer, I've got to put sheets up on my windows to keep the heat out so, but in terms of the cold it's, yes, it can be draughty. (H2)

...but I worry because the insulation is poor. It gets cold very quickly. When it gets hot in the summer, it gets hot very quickly. (H6)

It is important to note this reference to hot weather, something that is likely to become more of a problem in coming years because of climate change. One of the stakeholder interviewees mentioned this and called for a clearer strategy on helping vulnerable people keep their houses cool.

One of our stakeholder interviewees, working with carers, noted the particular importance of a warm house for those who are likely to be largely housebound, such as disabled and older people. In this excerpt, they associated being able to provide a warm home with being able to fulfil their role as a carer:

... it is because if someone's disabled or if they're not able to get out at all to do any exercise, if they're confined to the house, then... As you probably know yourself, if you're sitting around in the house, you need to have the heating on in the winter. You're not creating that energy of your own to create warmth, so they're having to keep the heating on a lot, and that's so expensive. That is a massive concern for them. The last thing you want to do is make the person you're caring for even more unwell by them being cold. Yes, really difficult. (S5)

Concerns expressed during our conversations related not only to thermal comfort but also to noise, with poor insulation making this more of a problem. For this interviewee, this was particularly difficult during Covid-19 lockdowns, when their neighbours played loud music:

One thing I've found about this house is the insulation is very poor. For example, one thing is that the floor is quite hollow, and when music – because during lockdown, for two years, music was just played morning till night, TV night till morning – oh, [interviewer name], it was a nightmare. Could not get away. In every room. (H6)

A part of the challenge is the diversity of housing across the relatively large area of Oxfordshire. Stakeholders reflected on this feature of housing across Oxfordshire, noting its complex relationship with urban form and socio-demographic characteristics, as in this example:

I think in certain parts of the district, especially the rural north parts of the district around Banbury, a lot of the housing stock is off gas, so I suppose those are some of the more harder-to-heat parts of the district, so possibly some assistance with improving heating provisions there, I'd say, is probably one of the main challenges. I guess, to counter that, the same properties in the more rural northern parts of the district would probably typically be owner-occupied, so you might find that the residents there are more affluent, and it's not so much of a problem for them. (S4)

3.2 Health impacts and conditions

In several cases, interviewees were able to describe the ways in which poor housing affected their health. This person, for example, had recently been spending more time in the house and had begun to notice the impact on his lungs, and at one point she had experienced a

collapsed lung. This she attributed to the dirty smell from damp, the result of not draining the guttering. She described this and noted that this was not something she was able to resolve herself:

Damp because of the bathroom, and because they were not draining the guttering... So you get this dirty smell, which affects the lungs, because you find if you spend more time in the house, you start to get breathless, and then the lungs build up... I would work 12-hour shifts. Now, being more in the house, that's when you discover the air's not so good. I don't know how to solve that. (H5)

She reflected on how this affects her life, both in and outside the home:

Things like damp, mould, just affect your mind. You can become irritable. Maybe, when you go to work, you're not linking up with people, because your mind is overwhelmed with all these things. So that can get you fired, or where people just think you are difficult, but it's probably because the home setting is not really good. So when you go to work, you take it out on other work colleagues, and you can get fired for that. They just say you're disruptive. (H5)



Figure 1 '... it is because if someone's disabled or if they're not able to get out at all to do any exercise, if they're confined to the house, then... As you probably know yourself, if you're sitting around in the house, you need to have the heating on in the winter. You're not creating that energy of your own to create warmth, so they're having to keep the heating on a lot, and that's so expensive. That is a massive concern for them. The last thing you want to do is make the person you're caring for even more unwell by them being cold. Yes, really difficult.' (S5)

This interviewee described her situation, linking multiple health conditions to her cold home and referring to the impact on her physical and mental wellbeing:

I suffer with really bad arthritis. When you feel old, that arthritis pain is really up to a next level. I also have Crohn's disease, and when you get a bad infection or you get a flare it lowers your body temperature, and it makes you feel rubbish anyway, but when you're cold there's nothing worse. The last 12 to 18 months I've struggled not only physically but mentally because of it...

Absolutely, anything, because I have arthritis in it, and anything when you've got problems with joints and things, the cold really does lower you down, and the pain is just... I also suffer with a problem called fibromyalgia, so that really does – you feel the cold all the time. (H9)

Another described the debilitating effect of mould, damp, and cold on them, leaving them unable to do anything but keep warm on the sofa:

... when my lung conditions flares up... I can get moments where I just can't breathe. I have so much mucus I can't breathe, so, clearly, mould, damp, cold all desperately affect that... I have an autoimmune condition, so, being cold all the time, I just feel completely drained and unmotivated. I just can't function when it's very cold. I end up on the sofa wrapped up. (H7)

Not all comments related to cold: heat could also have a debilitating effect. In this example, the interviewee recounted their experiences with long Covid and the potential for heat to make household tasks difficult and to worsen fatigue:

Reaching down to empty the dishwasher bottom drawer is not possible when it's really hot. I will fall down. It's also for, yes, the fatigue piece of it is just, yes. I belong to a few support groups online, and generally what people – everybody says, oh my God, this heat just knocks us out in a way that you can't explain to someone. It shouldn't – it feels like it shouldn't – but it just does. Even if I'm inside, even if I'm inside in air-conditioned rooms, I still am completely wiped out. (H2)

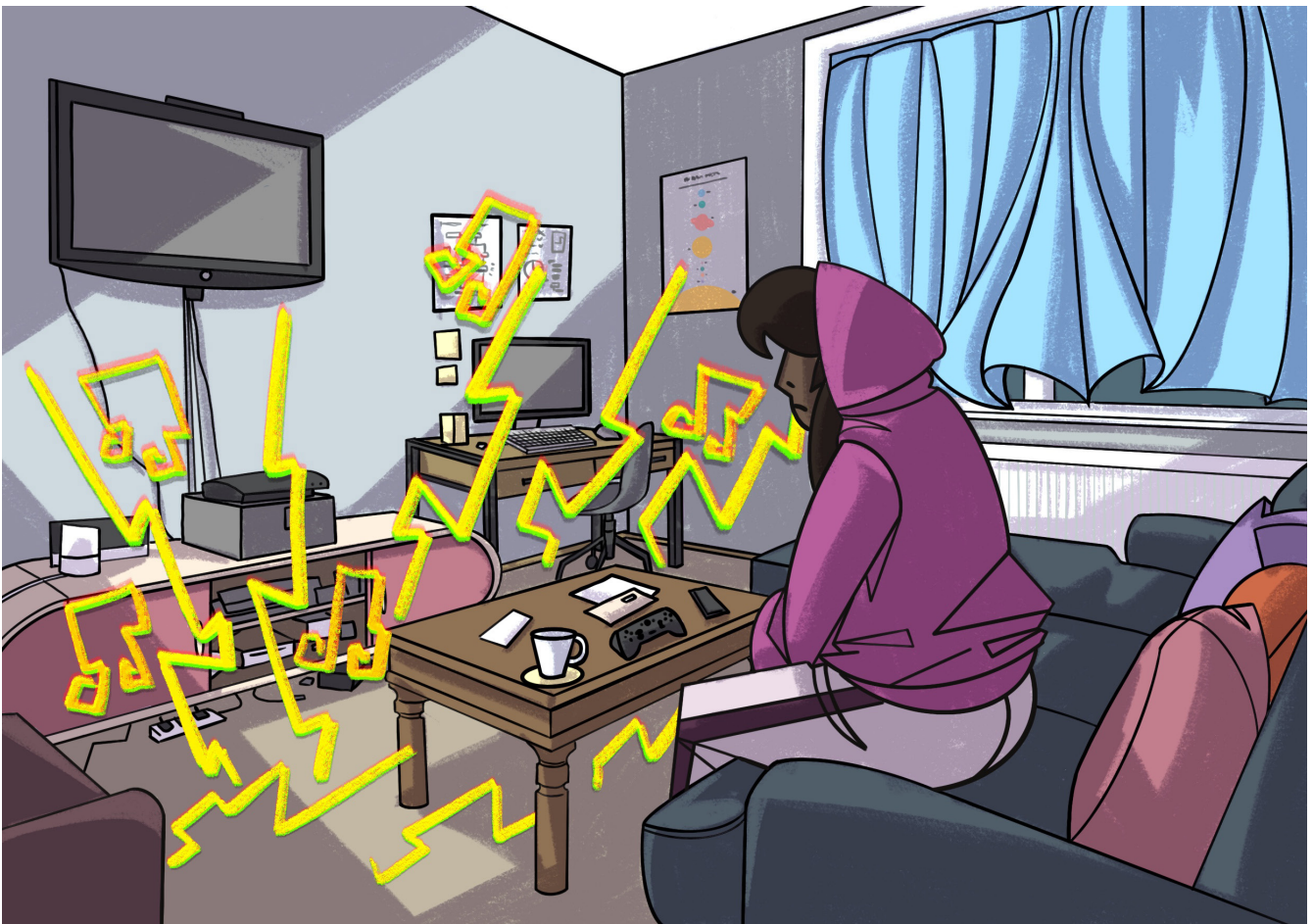


Figure 2 'One thing I've found about this house is the insulation is very poor. For example, one thing is that the floor is quite hollow, and when music, because during lockdown, for two years, music was just played morning till night, TV night till morning. Oh, [interviewer name], it was a nightmare. Could not get away. In every room.' (H6)

This person continued, discussing how they manage heat in their home given their particular sensitivity to it as a result of having long Covid:

Yes, so that's a nightmare because the heat also affects us medically. We have one of those portable air conditioners that you stick at the window, and we use it in one room, so we used it in the room that we're in most of the time and just try to keep all the blinds and everything closed in our bedrooms, hoping that it'll be cooled off by... If not, then we sleep down here, so that's how we did that. We literally closed off this one room completely. We even put tinfoil and board on top of, near the skylight above me, because we could, I could feel the heat coming in through there, so we blocked that off. (H2)

3.3 Triggers: Household finances and energy prices

Starting points for discussing energy

Stakeholders from other organisations reflected on the ways in which energy issues enter their conversations with householders; in other words, what is the starting point for a discussion on energy?

Sometimes a concern about energy is the reason for someone coming for advice, perhaps prompted by a large energy bill: *'They've had a bill, and it's horrendous, or they've just been told their direct debit is going up by another £60 a month, and they're just like, what is going on?'* (S2). In other cases, householders ask for help with household finances across the board, and it may be the advisor, rather than the householder, who identifies energy as an element of these expenses where savings could be made. This would be followed by a general discussion about household finances that includes opportunities to save money through changes in energy.

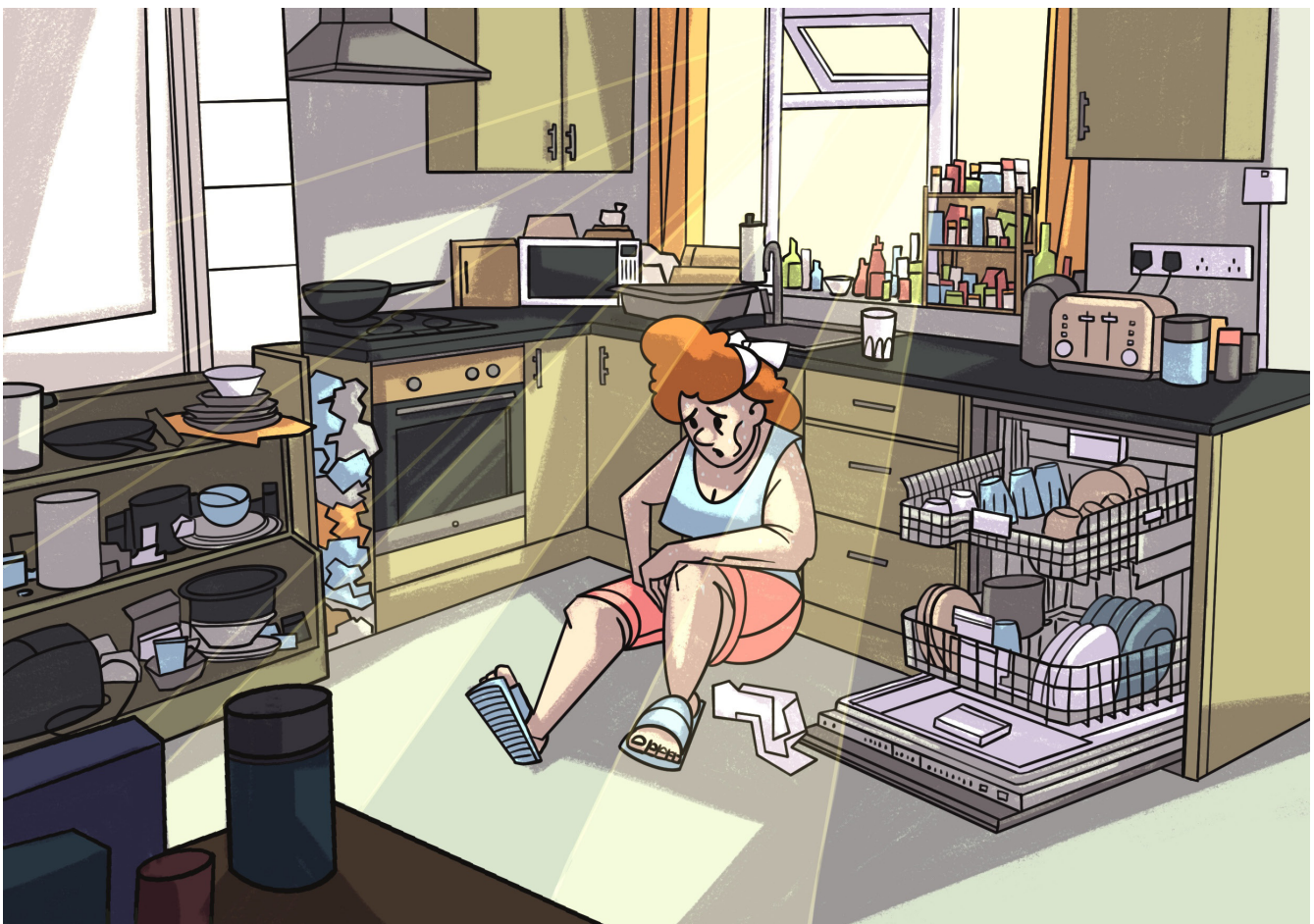


Figure 3 'Reaching down to empty the dishwasher bottom drawer is not possible when it's really hot. I will fall down. It's also for, yes, the fatigue piece of it is just, yes. I belong to a few support groups online, and generally what people - everybody says, oh my God, this heat just knocks us out, in a way that you can't explain to someone. It shouldn't, it feels like it shouldn't, but it just does. Even if I'm inside. Even if I'm inside in air-conditioned rooms, I still am completely wiped out.' (H2)

In the coordination meetings, the advisors mentioned going to see people who had moved into new social housing, and the carpets had been removed. This is the policy, for hygiene reasons, but new tenants are often unable to afford to replace the carpets. In some cases, tenants had been provided with curtains but were unable to fit them, an example of a time when some practical help is needed. The advisors also mentioned cases where people reported having their meter switched to prepayment against their will.

Another trigger for these discussions is a life-changing event such as a cancer diagnosis: *'you've just had this awful shock, and your life is going to change, and your income is going to change. Let's look at maximising your income, and let's also look at minimising expenditure'* (S2). In this instance, energy is again considered as one part of a household's budget. In these cases, it is not necessarily the case that energy has been too expensive or that the house has been cold. It is more that income is going to decrease and there is a need to cut costs.

Interviewees referred to recent increases in energy prices over 2022 and into 2023. A stakeholder interviewee reflected on this changing context, emphasising the challenging situation it was placing people in and noting that the benefits system was not keeping up with rising prices:

We're seeing a lot of people struggling with their energy bills. It wasn't quite so bad during the summer, obviously, but we're anticipating that it could be quite bad this coming winter for people. The benefits system doesn't really help people.

I was off on a cost-of-living seminar with Citizens Advice last week. Just as an example, Universal Credit eight years ago was £50 less than it is today, so over eight years Universal Credit for a single person has only gone up £50. The cost of living has skyrocketed, hasn't it? People are struggling.

With regard to housing, the Local Housing Allowance, which is for private rentals, hasn't moved. It hasn't increased in line with the rent, so people are getting stuck. They can't move. They can't, unless they can downsize. It's very difficult for people. (S8)



Figure 4 *'...you've just had this awful shock, and your life is going to change, and your income is going to change, let's look at maximising your income, and let's also look at minimising expenditure'* (S2).

When talking to people struggling financially, this stakeholder noted that energy was often just one part of household finances. Alongside other household items such as transport and food, domestic energy was not necessarily the main financial challenge, but it was one for which it might be possible to find savings with the help of services such as BHBH:

Very rarely, people say, 'Oh, I haven't got enough money for my fuel meter.' They just say, 'We haven't got enough money.' So I just go to certain sources to try and get as much money as I can for them, and then they can manage it how they wish. (S9)

Whatever the primary reason for a referral to one of the support services in Oxfordshire, energy may not be the householder's main concern and, as this stakeholder explained, they would have a more general discussion, and energy issues might come out of this as an area of concern:

Sometimes the reason they're referred actually isn't very high on their priority list, or it hadn't occurred to them before, or actually there's more important things at the moment that they're impacting on their wellbeing...

So, if that comes up, and they're saying that they might have issues or concerns over finances or that they're making choices over whether they eat well, or pay their rent, or heat their home, then we might just say holistically, are you aware of some of the support that's out there that you can access for X, Y, or Z? Then we might talk about things where they can get access to food, where then the Better Housing Better Health would come in in terms of being able to have a warm house. (S13)

Impact of price rises

Price increases had affected the ability of people to use heating as much as they would otherwise have liked to:

Yes, now, because of the price increases, and now the winter was very, very cold. Then if you don't really put the heating, damp starts. The lungs get affected. (H5)

... Both my sister and I, unfortunately, are disabled, so we are on a fixed income, and the rising cost of fuel has been catastrophic to us, so we don't put on the heat. (H2)



Figure 5 'Things like damp, mould, just affect your mind. You can become irritable. Maybe when you go to work, you're not linking up with people because your mind is overwhelmed with all these things. So that can get you fired or where people just think you are difficult, but it's probably because the home setting is not really good. So when you go to work, you take it out on other work colleagues, and you can get fired for that. They just say you're disruptive.' (H5)

Whilst we have been interested primarily in the affordability of heating in this study, it is important to remember that energy plays other roles in the home, not least for lighting and entertainment. Where concerns about costs had an impact on the use of lighting, for example, this related to a more general sense of being able to make somewhere a home. In this example, not being able to leave lights on when moving around the house could make it feel 'a little glum':

(Interviewer) Do you find that you limit the amount that you use in terms of electricity at all because of those high prices?

I do. In the evening, I only use the light, a lamp in my bedroom. Whenever I leave the room, I always [turn the] lights off. So the house is quite dark in general. The house is dark. It's a little bit glum. Yes, I can't put the lights on like I did when I was growing up. The light was on in my grandmother's house.

(Interviewer) Is that something, you'd prefer if you could put more light on, is that what you mean?

Yes, it would make it more homey. (H6)

Concerns about energy costs prompted some difficult decisions relating to who most needed heating and meant that some members of the household might go without. In this example, the parent put their child's comfort first, their use of 'obviously' underlining the instinctive nature of this:

I could not put my heating on in my living room. I have a child who is 12. I had to heat her room, obviously. We would argue as a parent that their welfare is more important than the adult. It's not, of course, but that's our logic. So I'd heat her room but not heat the living room. (H7)

In the following quote, this householder tended to be very selective with the heating, but this created problems when the house got cold, resulting in some pain:

... but, again, the heating, yes, it is a case of I'll only put it on absolutely if necessary. I'll just, as they say, heat me rather than the room. But if it's turned really cold, I am aware that I have to put a bedroom one on because to go and get into a bedroom which is cold, there's nothing worse. I would wake up very stiff and in pain because I've been cold. I have to keep warm without a doubt. I have to keep warm. (H9)

A stakeholder interviewee mentioned that they see carers using the allowance they are given for a holiday from caring duties to make up shortfalls in energy costs. Whilst not affording them the break as envisaged, they argued, it provides a break in some senses from the stress of managing bills. If this results in them being unable to take longer breaks or to go away on holiday, this could have an impact on their wellbeing:

No, not easily. No, no, you just get that overall feeling that people are definitely more in need of... One of the results of the carer's assessment that we send into Oxfordshire County Council is that the county council offer carers up to £300 every year to use for having a break. They can use that for help with gardening, help with cleaning if they're struggling with that, or to go and do a leisure pursuit of their own, but they're actually... a lot of people are now using it for bills, to put towards bills and costs, which gives them a break mentally from the stress, which works for them, yes. (S5)

3.4 Processes and support networks

The examples above demonstrate the extent to which cold (and sometimes hot) homes have an impact on health and wellbeing and the stress this situation puts on those living in poorly performing homes, accentuated by recent price rises in energy markets. This highlights the value of schemes such as BHBH, since they offer ways to help people find competitive tariffs, tackle fuel debt, and make improvements to their homes.

The need for BHBH and its counterparts is further evidenced by the difficulties people face in addressing their situation: if it were easy to 'break out' of fuel poverty, then such assistance would not be needed.

Our discussions highlighted two particular aspects here:

- People were sometimes unaware of some of the simple things they could do to improve their homes, so-called 'quick wins'.
- When they did attempt to improve conditions, they often found themselves locked in complex processes with various agencies, including their landlords.

This quote reflects the first point, expressing gratitude to BHBH for helping the interviewee to understand some of the basics of energy efficiency, including using draught excluders and curtains and keeping internal doors closed:

There were certain things that she suggested that I didn't know... things like the draught excluders, things like she told me to keep the doors closed, when I heat a room keep the doors closed. I've always kept my doors open, never thought to think, well I'm heating a room, and I've got the doors open, keep the doors closed. But curtains on the door, yes, that would really make sense...

For instance, they've said putting blinds on the glass part of the door, because that helps, thermal blinds help keep the cold coming through the glass, and it's made a difference. Those things I've acted on, small little blinds, thermal blinds, and it's made a difference. When I shut everything up at night, and I put curtains across and blinds down, to me it does feel a little bit warmer... (H9)

The second point, relating to the complex processes people engage with to seek support, is illustrated through a set of examples. In this first case, the interviewee appreciated help with 'paperwork', implying that they would not have been able to deal with this on their own:

(Interviewer) Was there anything that you were left thinking that they couldn't do or that you wanted from the service?

No. That was the only thing I wanted him to do: to help me through the paperwork. I'm not that good on reading and writing, so that's why they helped me. (H8)

This interviewee described an ongoing 'battle' with her housing association to secure 'decent' heating that would be sufficient for the property:

But I am in a long battle, and it's been four years, believe it or not, I'm still battling with this housing association to try and get me some decent heating that I can turn a switch on and it will heat the whole property, and it won't keep shutting down, and it'll be sufficient to heat the property.

I have fingers crossed, but I just don't know. I've taken it to a complaint, and they are dealing with it at the moment, but they're extremely slow, and I've said to them many times, please try and do something for me before the winter, but they just take forever: four years, I'm on the fourth year now. (H9)

In this example, a parent was waiting for a response from the council so that she could get another toilet because of her child's kidney condition:

My daughter, my second daughter, she has got a health condition. She has got cystic kidneys and a small bladder. So, for her, she needs to use the toilet quite a lot. We have in our house only one toilet, and the council kindly felt that probably they will build another toilet because of their needs, my kids' needs, but still it is in progress for adaptation. We applied, and still there is no update. I'm just waiting for the result. (H10)

These challenges are concerning not only because they mean that issues with housing are not being addressed, or at least not as quickly as householders would like, but also because this process, described by one interviewee as a 'merry-go-round', is stressful and therefore has an impact upon health:

Right now, it's like going merry-go-round. It's causing more stress. I don't think it's good for my health, especially the high blood pressure. If you get stressed it shoots up. (H5)

4. Home visits

Home visits are an important part of the BHBH service, a way of providing a personal service to clients with the opportunity to focus on the home and its heating system, as well as to talk to them about their wellbeing in a setting familiar to them. Householders were positive about home visits. They are convenient and do not involve making difficult or expensive journeys. People can avoid any stigma or problematic exposure that might be associated with visiting advice centres for support. Interviewees appreciated the face-to-face nature, making it more comfortable to discuss energy issues and easier to talk about difficulties than it would be over the phone.

Home visits are particularly relevant to projects that focus on energy in the home since the advisor can look around the home for any issues that may be affecting heating system performance and costs. Advisors were able to experience how the home felt in relation to temperature and indoor air quality. At times this helped them to feel vindicated whereas they had felt that their concerns were not taken seriously during telephone consultations and conversations with landlords. The experience of being listened to in a context in which the energy advisor could understand and experience the home was something that was beneficial for wellbeing. Stakeholders also valued home visits, noting in particular the potential to better identify and understand the severity of issues and to get a full picture of the experiences of householders.

4.1 Experiencing home visits

An important element of BHBH is the provision of home visits, whereby an energy advisor from NEF comes to the home. They talk to the householder about energy issues and inspect aspects of the home to better understand any challenges they may be experiencing. This follows a phone call to establish possible issues acting at a more general level.

From the point of view of stakeholder interviewees, one of the reasons this was viewed positively was that other organisations saw value in visiting service users in their homes but did not have the capacity to do this themselves. In this sense, BHBH was able to add to the overall level of support available in Oxfordshire:

We, as an organisation, don't tend to do home visits... With BHBH being able to go into people's houses and get a first-hand experience of what the problem is, is really useful. They're very good at feeding back to us, if we've made a referral, what they've found out and established and how they're going to try and help them. (S8)

There was some disagreement over this latter point. Some interviewees felt that BHBH was good at feeding back after a home visit to someone they had referred into the programme, whereas others commented that they

tended not to receive an update. It was implied that this depended to some extent on the relationship between the organisations and what processes they had in place for data sharing, as there would be pertinent privacy and data protection issues.

From the point of view of householders, they appreciated the advice session being conducted in the home. There was a practical advantage to this. Attending a session at an advice centre would involve travel time and transport costs, and health issues might make journeys difficult:

Yes, it's more helpful to me if people can come to me, because then I haven't got to get taxis and travelling, if I'm not well. If I'm not feeling well, I don't really want to book taxis to go to people, if my circumstances don't allow me. If people come here and I'm okay with it, then it's a big help to me. (H3)

In addition to these practical considerations, there is a less tangible advantage in that people might not want to be seen coming in for help: *'or some people are reluctant to come in to see us because they think they don't want to be seen coming in to see us, basically, because people are quite proud'* (S8).

Householders were positive about the quality of the experience and the level of communication, i.e. the opportunity to speak face to face rather than over the phone:

Well, you can get to know people, can't you? I'm talking to you now. I can get an opinion of your voice, but you can't put a picture, you know what I mean? If I'm stood next to you, you get more of a... I know this sounds silly, but you know what I mean, don't you, yes?... you feel more comfortable, I think, talking to somebody when you're talking next to them. (H1)

Whilst most householders were positive about these aspects of home visits, the following householder was less enthusiastic and felt that a phone call would have had the same value. Clearly these experiences will vary and depend on individual householders, their preferences, and what kind of issues the advice session focuses on:

(Interviewer) Just thinking about the fact that it was in your house, did that make any difference to you?

Yes, it did make a difference. It cheered me up a little bit.

(Interviewer) In terms of him being able to point things out and things like that, were there any advantages like that?

No.

(Interviewer) Do you feel like, imagining it if it was like a telephone call instead, was it better than a telephone call or worse?

No, I'd say it's the same, really. (H8)

In the following case, the interviewee was more definite, reflecting that the advice session would have 'been the same' on the phone, implying that it would cover the same content, whilst at the same time highlighting the different nature of the experience and the additional ease of communication:

No, I think it would have been the same, but it just felt different with the person being in the room with me. It was easier for me to go through it than, actually it's different when you're on the phone talking to somebody, because when they're in the room, you can see the expression on their faces when you're explaining things to somebody, it's easier to communicate. (H3)

Whilst these quotes reveal the views of householders across our sample, it is possible that this in-person, in-home approach is of particular value to older and otherwise vulnerable people. This stakeholder suggested

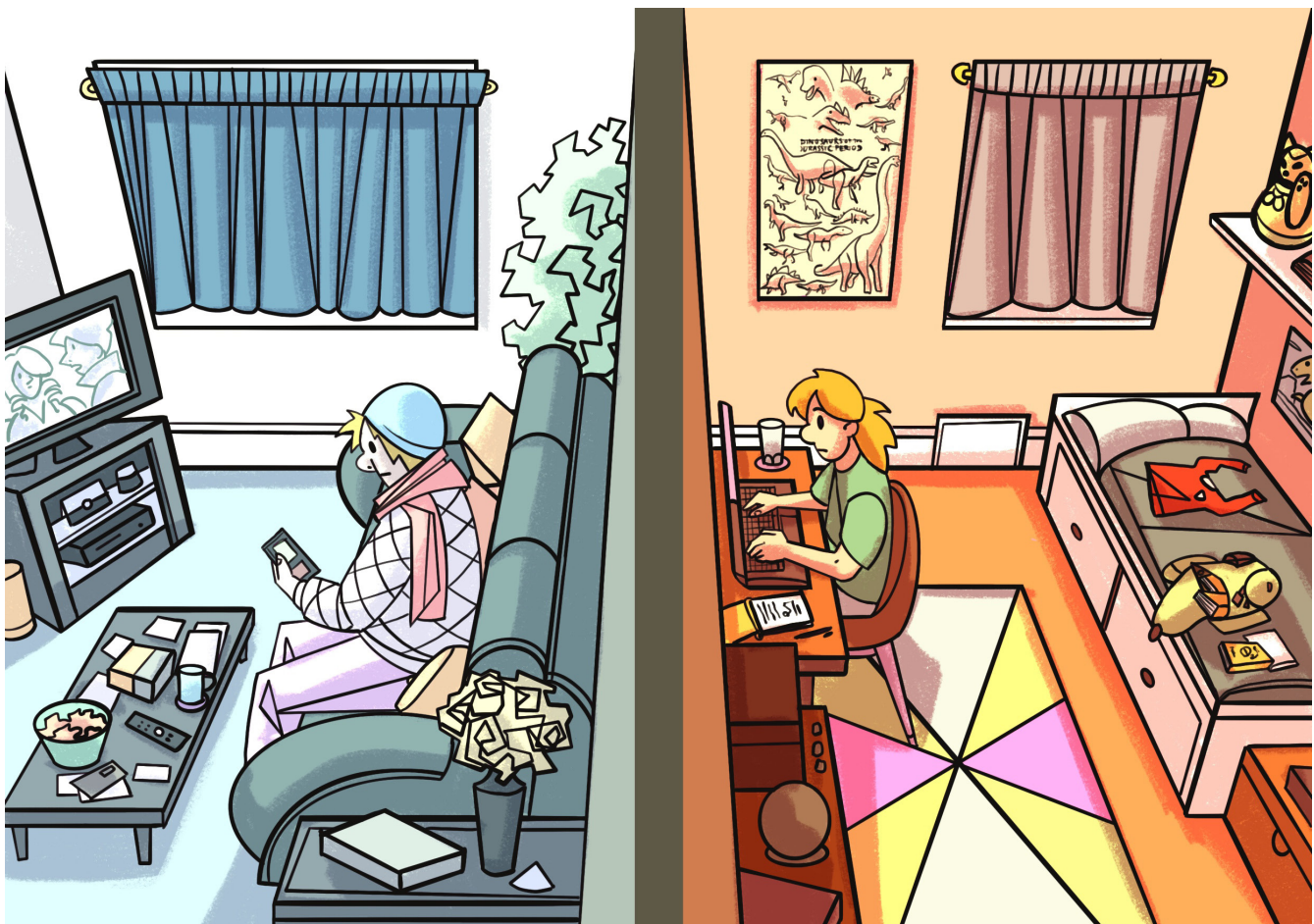


Figure 6 'I could not put my heating on in my living room. I have a child who is 12. I had to heat her room, obviously. We would argue as a parent that their welfare is more important than the adult. It's not, of course, but that's our logic. So I'd heat her room, but not heat the living room.' (H7)

that older people are more likely to appreciate the energy advisor talking through energy issues in their homes, whereas young people might find this more intrusive. The level of digital literacy, they felt, could also be an issue and something that would relate to age to some extent:

I think often, particularly with elderly residents, they just really appreciate that face-to-face contact, even the simple things that we take for granted because we're so digitally connected, you know, we can Google things and look up advice. What's the current rate? What's my tariff? What am I paying? All of those things we sort of take for granted, but actually just having somebody in your home who's got the time to sit there and go through those things with you... elderly people are definitely more receptive. I don't know why that would be. I think sometimes maybe younger people might feel that it's a bit intrusive. Maybe they feel like they should be able to cope on their own. (S6)

4.2 Feeling seen and understood

When considering the health impact, the wellbeing benefit of having someone come to the home and understand the issues and try to help should not be discounted.

This interviewee explained that she was still waiting for changes to be made that would make the home warmer but that in the meantime the home visit had helped her feel more positive:

As for health conditions, no, I think that will get better when I get the property better heated, but I did feel a little bit more positive: positive in the fact that somebody had come in and looked round and said, 'This is really a cold property. I understand your problems', and that did make me feel a little bit more positive. (H9)

Another interviewee described feeling supported: 'Yes, absolutely. I felt empowered. I felt cared about. I felt taken care of' (H2).



Figure 7 'But I am in a long battle, and it's been four years believe it or not I'm still battling with this housing association to try and get me some decent heating that I can turn a switch on and it will heat the whole property, and it won't keep shutting down, and it'll be sufficient to heat the property... I have fingers crossed, but I just don't know. I've taken it to a complaint and they are dealing with it at the moment, but they're extremely slow, and I've said to them many times, please try and do something for me before the winter. But they just take forever, four years, I'm on the fourth year now.' (H9)

Interviewees also appreciated being able to show the advisor aspects of the house rather than having to explain them over the phone: *'When she came, she walked around the house. She gave me lots of advice for these draughty windows, and also for the doors, how I can keep it closed and things'* (H10).

From our discussions, there was also a sense that having a home visit meant that issues could be sorted out relatively quickly, avoiding the need for multiple phone calls:

Yes, like showing her the back door. So she was able to look around. I showed her around the house as it goes. Yes, it was much better than just over the phone or call up and try and get through on these never-ending phones. Yes, I felt it was much better. (H11)

Related to this, this interviewee explained that it was reassuring that the energy advisor could see and experience any problems she was having. In comparison, her communications with her housing provider had left her feeling that she was not being believed:

... because they came to me and they could see the problems. They also could see how cold the property was. In fact, the young lady that came in said that it was a very cold floor, and I said, yes, it is a cold property. Because she could see the reasons why I'd complained, and she could see – the great thing was that they agree with me totally. They could see where the property is, how it would affect me, and they totally agreed, which was a big, huge thing for me, because the housing association make me feel like I'm just moaning about nothing.

(Interviewer) So it gave you that validation, that someone else has seen it?

Absolutely. (H9)

This householder continued, emphasising the difference between a home visit and a phone call, because the advisor could be there and observe issues in the home:

Whereas if I did that on the phone or if I went to their office, they couldn't experience that. They couldn't see where the draughts were coming from. They couldn't see what the problems were in the property. I could tell them all about it, but to physically be in the room – and they went room to room looking at each individual problem that I had in keeping warm and keeping healthy, and that's a huge advantage. (H9)

One interviewee had received a remote home visit conducted over a video call. They were positive about this, and the advisor was able to direct them around the house and ask the householder to show them aspects of the home. They recalled that they were able to help the advisor find the meter, even though they had not known where this was previously:

Literally every inch of this house we talked about, everything. I said to him I didn't even know where the meter was. So he said, 'All right, we'll find it!' It turns out it's on the outside of the house, under a place you'd never think. (H2)

We asked the householder if they thought there might be more that could have been done as part of the visit if it had been in person. This was clearly a difficult question for them to answer, as they had not experienced a home visit to compare it to, but they reflected that they were limited by their own knowledge in relation to what they could show on the call whereas the advisor may have spotted additional things if attending in person:

(Interviewer) Was there more that could have been done if the person was in person?

I guess I would have to say I would assume so, because I could only tell him what I could see and knew to say, or knew to ask, right? (H2)

4.3 Getting the full picture

When speaking to stakeholders, it was clear that they shared this sense that the advice from an in-person home visit could be more comprehensive in comparison with a phone call and, perhaps to a lesser extent, a video call. This interviewee referred to a need, for example, to ensure that advice is not 'abstract':

Well, I think it is, because I think if people have got fuel poverty, and they're in rented accommodations which are not in good condition, so maybe they've got a lot of draught coming into the house, and they need advice, they need somebody actually to go to the house, rather than getting advice which is just very abstract. They need to actually go and give practical advice on how they can better insulate their house. (S1)

This is particularly important when it is considered that householders may be unable or unwilling to report problems. As this interviewee explained, a response of 'I'm managing absolutely fine' may belie issues that the householder is not aware of, does not feel comfortable disclosing, or has simply got used to:

I've spoken to so many people on the phone, and they've told me, 'Everything's fine here. I'm managing absolutely fine.' Then we've done a home visit, and you can see, when you've gone into a person's home, that things aren't fine, that maybe they are struggling with keeping their home tidy.

Definitely a massive advantage to be able to go into their home and feel if it's cold, see if it's an older home and there are lots of draughts. It's really important. A home visit makes a massive difference.

You can pick up a lot more on a home visit... I suppose sometimes people get used to a problem, and so they don't, maybe, see it always as a problem if they've lived with it for a long time. To be able to identify that and say, 'Oh, well, you can get some support for that', is really good. (S1)

This stakeholder agreed and provided some examples of where the severity of an issue had been underestimated or underreported. They noted as well that reports from householders do not necessarily reflect the whole picture: *'so you get a better idea on what they're saying, because people have different... the way they think and see, things are different'* (S12):

There are things that you would never see... I went into one home, and the dad said, 'Actually, I've got a lot of water running down the wall.' He had water running down his wall. It was like a little waterfall, yes. If they said that to me, I'd have thought, oh, it was probably a little bit of damp in the corner or something... So, for some person, a little tiny bit of water in a corner is a waterfall, and for someone it's just a little bit of water in the corner, but this person really did have a lot of water running down the side of his home. He had some structural damage. (S12)

In another example, they mentioned a single parent who reported seeing some mould growing underneath her bed. The advisor needed to see it to appreciate the scale of the issue:

Then she proceeded to show me, and there was mould growing underneath her bed, actually on the bed underneath. It's just stuff you wouldn't see if you hadn't have been told or you hadn't been shown. I didn't need to see it, but she did show me. So there are things that we do get to see. (S12)

Another example, with the implication that this is relatively common, was an immersion heater that had been left running, and the householder did not know that this was causing high bills, and a telephone assessment would not have picked up on this:

I think it adds concrete things, just having eyes on in the property, particularly around things like setting heating controls, understanding how the actual heating system works in the home.

Often the home visit advisor will go out and find that someone's got their immersion heater on 24 hours a day and didn't know that it could be changed. You've got those scenarios where on the helpline when you've done the Warm and Well Assessment, sometimes you are left a bit stumped. What is it here that we can actually do for this person?

It's really key to be able to, particularly with those cases where you think, okay, your energy bill sounds about right, you look like you're getting all the benefits you're entitled to... is there anything more we can do here? That's the real value of the home visit, getting eyes on in a place. (S6)

For this stakeholder, it was not only about specific issues such as these examples, but also a general feeling about wellbeing in the household, and this was something they felt their own work (separate from BHBH) had lost since their emphasis had shifted from home visits to telephone calls. Their response was to change the focus of the questions and try to delve into some of the detail through the call, remaining reliant on the householder's own perceptions:

We used to do home visits a lot before Covid, whereas now most of our work's done on the telephone, so you don't get... You don't walk into the house and go: these people need help. You've just got to really pick out the questions and try and develop the answers a bit more...

I just think, as soon as you walk into somebody's house, you get an overall feel of how they're coping. Filling in a form, you can say, 'Everything's fine', but if you walk into the house, you can sometimes get a feeling that things aren't quite right, or it feels cold when you walk in, or sometimes it feels overly hot. (S5)

An additional advantage relates to the focus on energy and the home and requires some technical expertise. This is the need to inspect aspects of the building and installed technology. The householder could not be expected to have the expertise to do this. This is different from, for example, financial advice, since it relates to technical aspects of the home. It may apply to some groups in particular, but it is likely that most householders would not have the technical knowledge:

So are you asking whether – so, definitely, the wall insulation needs to be checked in person. I don't think the homeowners can really do that, because if they are elderly and they don't know what they're looking for, I think that is where it's helpful for me to see the pattern of dots and point out you have insulated cavity walls. (S7)

5. Impact on householders

Broadly speaking, householders valued the advice they were given and appreciated being given ‘the basics’ on energy efficiency. This empowered them to make some changes. These changes should, however, be understood in the context of the constraints householders experienced in taking more substantial action, particularly when this involved making modifications to the home. They came up against financial difficulties, limitations in their skills and ability, and, in the case of private and social renters, the reluctance of their landlord to invest in energy efficiency.

5.1 Introduction

We have noted the challenge of accurately assessing the impact of a scheme like BHBH. It is difficult to measure changes in the short to medium term, especially in relation to long-term conditions. It is also difficult to reliably attribute any changes to particular measures.

It is possible to be more confident, however, about the ways in which homes aggravate existing conditions and cause new ones, as we have explored in Chapter 3. It follows that measures that enable people to improve the poor conditions in their homes will have a positive impact on health. The scale of that impact is something that is hard to ascertain through qualitative social research; the health statistics explored in the partner project to this one [1] provide more evidence of that. Nevertheless, interviewees were able to share valuable insights into their own wellbeing and the impacts the service has had on them, as well as on the severity of conditions and the extent of their interaction with health services.

5.2 Appreciating advice

One aspect of evidence of impact is that people appreciated and were able to follow advice: *‘We took every piece of advice that he gave us. We did absolutely everything that he suggested’* (H2).

Most of the interviewees commented positively about the advice they were given and were, to varying extents, able to act on it. This related to some more complex issues, like changing the temperature on the boiler, but also to more ‘mundane’ things like avoiding filling the kettle to the top, washing hands in cold water, and using draught excluders. We have noted that householders do not necessarily know ‘the basics’ of energy efficiency and therefore appreciate these hints and tips. Rather than being seen as patronising, they can be empowering.

Interviewees gave the impression that they were receiving new information and that this was useful. In this example, the words ‘blew my mind’, in relation to setting the water temperature, illustrate this:

Yes, absolutely, he was very clear. When he said to us about the water temperature, and I said, ‘I’m sorry, what?’ He explained that ‘Well, you probably have it set at 70, 75, and it doesn’t need to be that high.’ I said, ‘Okay, but I don’t understand.’ He said, ‘Well, if you set it down at 60, it’ll still be hot water.’ I was like, ‘Okay.’ He explained to me how, when it’s set at 75, every time I turn the hot water on it takes the energy to heat up everything to be that hot at that level. Again, blew my mind. (H2)

The interviewee emphasised that the information was new to them, and they reflected that this helped them to feel prepared for further price rises:

Absolutely, stuff I didn’t know. I have to say that this was, again, July of 2022. I think it was then in the wintertime, when it was really cold, you had all the morning breakfast shows and stuff talking about all these tips that he had told us. So it felt very, ‘Oh, our guy told us all this. We knew six months ago. We’ve already done that.’ (H2)

In another example, this householder mentioned that she had *‘never thought to think’* (H9) about heat escaping from rooms around the house and had, since the advice session, begun closing internal doors and liked the idea of putting curtains on the doors. She had added *‘thermal blinds to help keep the cold coming through the glass’* (H9) on doors, and that had ‘made a difference’.

She referred to the house feeling more comfortable in the evening:

When I shut everything up at night, and I put curtains across and blinds down, to me it does feel a little bit warmer. It'll take quite a lot to get me quite warm, but it does. (H9)

She also referred to some more general measures to save electricity, such as turning sockets off, not leaving appliances turned on, and limiting use of the tumble dryer: *'they are all commonsense things when you're trying to reduce your energy down'* (H9).

In this example, the advisor suggested making improvements to flooring and was able to help the householder secure funding to do this, an example of the BHBH visit resulting in material changes:

Yes, her suggestion was to get the floor done, and they said that they don't have the funds to help me with that, but she suggested going back to Citizens Advice, which I did, and I got a small grant towards it so I was able to do that. (H9)

5.3 Feeling constrained

This level of satisfaction was not universal, however. One interviewee felt that there had been too much emphasis on behavioural changes. Their concern related in part to the amount of time the process took, feeling instead that the information could have been conveyed in a more straightforward manner: *'and I thought, oh my God, why didn't you just send me an email, a leaflet telling me this information itself'* (H6). It also related to the nature of the advice, implying that it was going to achieve small changes: *'They were telling me, "Make sure you close your door. Change your light bulbs." That was all. Oh, yes, "When you sit in your chair, bring a shawl to cover you." I thought, what?'* (H6). What they had expected, and what they felt would have had more impact, was a more comprehensive check of their home:

I thought he was going to come round and he was going to check the material and make sure, 'Okay, if your home is not warm enough, then we can actually give you a grant, and we can get some more insulation.' (H6)

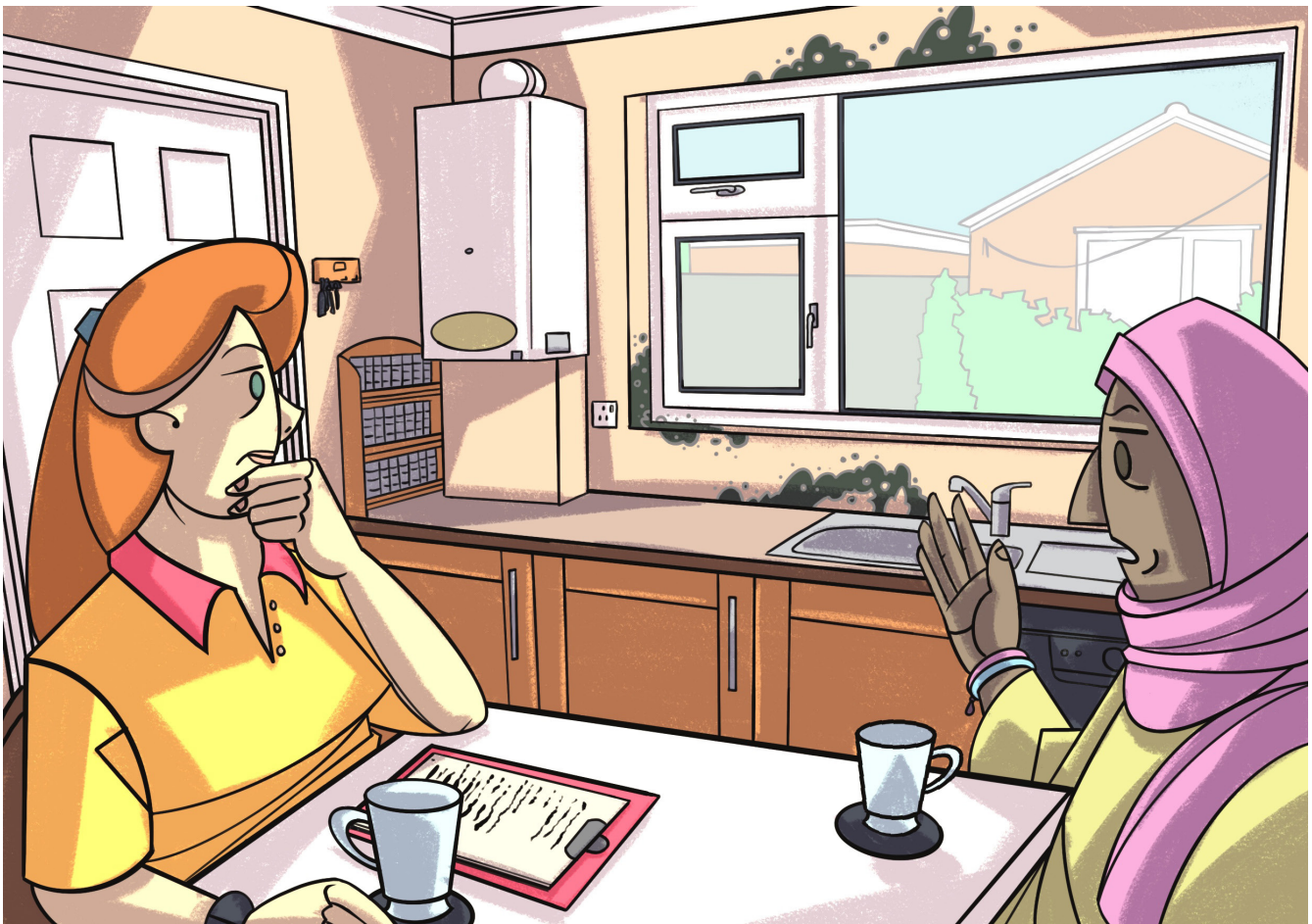


Figure 8 *'... because they came to me, and they could see the problems. They also could see how cold the property was. In fact the young lady that came in said that it was a very cold floor, and I said yes it is a cold property. because she could see the reasons why I'd complained, and she could see - the great thing was that they agree with me totally. They could see where the property is, how it would affect me, and they totally agreed, which was a big, huge thing for me. Because the housing association make me feel like I'm just moaning about nothing.'* (H3)

This experience left the householder with a negative view of the service:

They don't actually have resources to do anything. So I just thought, my God, this organisation, they're getting money to do what, exactly? They're supposed to be helping vulnerable people in the community. (H6)

For another interviewee, although she appreciated the advice she was given and was able to act on some of it, he felt that the substantial savings were out of reach because they related to aspects of the home that were outside his control and that they needed the involvement of the landlord to address. In this case, the issue was the windows:

(Interviewer) Any of [the advice] around saving energy, did that help in terms of bills at all?

Yes, the switches. Switching on and off, that really helped, because if I wasn't switching off, imagine what the bills would have been like when they put them up.

(Interviewer) Did they give you any other advice at all around energy saving or anything you can think of?

No, just the switches, because I don't have a loft, so the loft thing would not apply. Then the other thing is the windows that need changing. So now that's Oxford City Council again. He was asking me, when were they put in. I don't know. When I moved in 2004, they were there. (H5)

Similarly, another interviewee commented that parts of the advice had helped but that they needed the involvement of their landlord to improve the heating:

Yes, I mean it did help, but then there's a lot of other things that's not involved with them that you can't change without a landlord. So without them doing the other things, there is going to be a difference from what they explained to me, than the other things that the landlord needs to do to improve the heating and everything. (H3)



Figure 9 'I think one role would be for the DIY home-visit advisor, somebody to go and put things on... that I was home-visit advisor for [another agency], and we did really have plumbers to go back and put things in. So that we could have in this project as well. Then the second role I was thinking about is - I don't know - the project officers, I think that's what they do; they follow on with people, but it would be interesting to ask them whether they have enough time for it. So it could be a person to be designated to this resident, and they would follow through to the end...'

Although issues with landlords are relatively common and it is well documented that the private rented sector has poor energy efficiency, landlords were not all uninterested in the energy efficiency of their properties. It was mentioned, in fact, that private landlords do sometimes approach BHBH to enquire about how they could improve energy efficiency in the properties they rent out.

It is also the case that it is not only the private sector that can be problematic. In one of the coordination meetings, the advisors referred to difficulty in getting housing associations to accept responsibility for damp issues and to accept that structural work will need to be carried out, rather than blaming damp and mould on the behaviour of the tenant. This stakeholder reflected on their relationship with local social landlords, describing the difficulties they have getting results on behalf of tenants and noting the way the situation had changed since the local office had closed and the service had moved online:

There's a lot of social housing around here, but the social landlords don't seem to be keen to sort out problems, unless it's something which is really urgent, like, I don't know, a leak coming into the house. They say they'll send people around, and it never seems to materialise, or not very often. A big landlord around here... during the pandemic, they closed that office here, but there were a lot of tenants who could just go to the office if they had a problem.

Now they can't do that. You can't get through on the phone, so you have to send in an online form, which they're not always capable of doing. You do it on their behalf, but then nothing seems to happen after that, so you put in a complaint, and still things don't necessarily get sorted out. Then eventually they'll send somebody around, but maybe just for one small issue. There might be three or four, and they're, 'Oh, we've only come for A. We're not dealing with B, C, or D.' It's very frustrating. (S1)

In another case, it was the circumstances of the family that meant that the householder felt unable to follow the advice given to her. She was concerned about the health of her son, who suffered from multiple conditions, including a blood disorder. She had been advised to close the doors of the rooms the children were using, e.g. so that the children could be in a warm room whilst the rest of the house might stay colder. She was concerned, however, about the child roaming to colder areas of the house and therefore did not want to close the doors, preferring to keep an even temperature around the house rather than achieving warmth in just one room:

Yes, it is really cold. When your colleague came to visit here, she gave me really good advice. There was quite lots of good advice as well, but some of the things that she told me, it wasn't really feasible for us to do it. For example, she asked me to keep the doors closed, and the room will be warm for the kids. Then I feel like, my son, he doesn't have any sense that he will get cold or anything, so he will go [to the] toilet, and the toilet will be cold. He will get more ill. So that's why I'm not closing the doors. (H10)

5.4 Feeling good, feeling supported

Alongside the potential for material changes that would help create healthy homes, home visits and other advice sessions also had a more direct and immediate impact upon wellbeing. These householders described the positive feeling from having someone come and speak about and understand the challenges they face. The first interviewee made the implicit distinction between medium-term impacts and the more immediate reaction:

As for health conditions, no, I think that will get better when I get the property better heated, but I did feel a little bit more positive: positive in the fact that somebody had come in and looked round and said, 'This is really a cold property. I understand your problems', and that did make me feel a little bit more positive. (H9)

I've felt more content. They were helping me. They were looking out for me. I felt content, do you know what I mean? Is that the right word, content?... Yes, I felt more comfortable, more comfortable, yes. They didn't put me at risk, or anything like that. No, they were very helpful. (H1)

In this instance, the householder could not clearly remember which specific organisation had administered a home visit, but their words add to the evidence of the value of this approach in making the householder feel supported and understood:

When you feel like you're drowning and no one's helping you, and all you want is a safety line, when someone comes and says, 'Here, get into my boat, and here's a blanket', it's the world. That's how he made me feel... Definitely, mental health has been improved, and wellbeing, and feeling that my health is better protected or safeguarded. He also said to me that I need to stop worrying about people shutting off my electricity!... His help and his advice definitely gave us peace of mind. (H2)

Whilst the overall message was very positive, there is a risk, as the following householder described, that home visits can feel like wasted time, depending on the nature of the advice and whether the advisor could help the householder. Unfortunately, in this case the interviewee felt 'drained', commenting on the limited help that the advisor could offer:

No, he [BHBH home visitor] didn't have anything to offer. His evidence was, use a blanket, close the door in each room so you keep the heat in, and use a small kitchen appliance rather than large equipment. Change your light bulb to energy-efficient. I was like, what? I didn't react. I didn't say anything. I said, 'Okay, thank you very much.' He was there for two hours with me. I felt drained... (H6)

As we have noted, it is difficult to attribute causality to changes in health, especially over a relatively short period and when reliant on self-reported experiences. In some cases, however, householders were conscious of potential benefits to their health, as this interviewee expressed. She mentioned the advice she was able to act upon and made direct reference to her health:

...When I shut everything up at night, and I put curtains across and blinds down, to me it does feel a little bit warmer. It'll take quite a lot to get me quite warm, but it does...

What was great for me is that there is a link with me, definitely a link in my energy and the heating and the way my house is to my health, and that's what was so great, the information was so good. (H9)

She also put these improvements within the context of her health overall, noting that she was less optimistic about her health conditions being substantially helped until her heating system could be improved:

As for health conditions, no, I think that will get better when I get the property better heated, but I did feel a little bit more positive: positive in the fact that somebody had come in and looked round and said, 'This is really a cold property. I understand your problems', and that did make me feel a little bit more positive. (H9)

This householder, living with cancer and COPD, highlighted the boundary around their sphere of influence. They had addressed those aspects of the home that they could, following advice from a home visit. What remained in relation to their home required action from their landlord, and the more complex aspects of their health required input from their doctor:

I mean, everything we've gone through, a lot of the things have been addressed, has been sorted out. Some of the other things still need to be done, but it can only be done through a landlord. When it comes to my health inside the bungalow, that can only be changed by a doctor. There's no way that I can change my health issues. What we've gone through, I think it's covered everything. (H3)

6. Impact on networks

BHBH complements existing networks of support in Oxfordshire. In a sense, this relates to capacity: having more people with more time to help more people. The nature of the support is also important. In particular, BHBH is able to act proactively and provide technical expertise on energy issues in the home, something for which few other organisations have in-house capacity. Help with energy issues was seen to be particularly time-consuming since it involved travelling to and spending time in homes, as well as, potentially, spending time communicating with utility companies.

BHBH is an addition to the diverse and wide-ranging network of support in Oxfordshire. It adds capacity to this network in terms not only of time and resources but also of specific energy-related expertise. In this sense, it adds an important energy and housing component to the support offer:

I think it just gives us another person that we can refer on to, another specialist organisation. Instead of us just trying to give soundbites of advice, it's somebody that can actually go in and deal with things, who've got all of the knowledge. (S5)

The interviewee continued, commenting on the increasing need for support on a range of issues and noting that as support organisations such as their own *'seem to be getting busier and busier'* (S5), they struggle to have time to provide the quantity and the depth: *'Knowing that you can pass that information and say, "This person will be able to help you, and they've got specialist knowledge", you feel confident that they'll get that support then. Yes, it does make a lot of difference'* (S5).

The provision of extra capacity, in a general sense, was not BHBH's only contribution; another was the ability to provide specialist technical expertise and to be proactive. To this stakeholder, BHBH was the go-to organisation for energy and related issues:

We've got a specialist organisation in Oxfordshire that we can refer to, but that would be debt advice... I would say, for me, personally – I can't say that I'm representing the view of the whole of [the organisation] – when I think energy efficiency and support with keeping homes warm, I immediately think Better Housing Better Health. (S3)

BHBH was, according to one stakeholder, able to be more proactive than the public sector:

A lot of what we do is reactive, because people come to us to highlight disrepair issues in their homes, and there probably isn't an awful lot of many other options to deal with it, whereas BHBH can deal, or find stuff, proactively, especially in terms of ECO. They're working with the energy providers and energy installers, so they can run through all the applications and eligibility criteria. I don't think it's something we would have the time for. (S4)

The ability to offer specialist energy and housing advice was particularly valuable:

We do more. I do a lot of benefits appeals and benefits issues, but we can't be specialists in everything, so, obviously, if there's another organisation which is specialising in one area, then it's better for us to refer to them. (S1)

That's the other thing, is people don't know. You'll ask them questions about their insulation and stuff, and they're just a bit vague. So, actually being able to say, 'Someone's going to come by, and they're actually going to look at what you've got and say, "Actually, I think you need this, and this, and this. Let's talk to your landlord. Let's apply for a grant."' (S2)

Similarly, it was valuable that BHBH has staff with capacity to conduct home visits and with the expertise to investigate energy issues in the home:

So, yes, as a matter of course we don't normally do home visits, and actually for some of our particularly more vulnerable clients in rented housing it's actually really helpful to be able to say to someone, 'If you're okay with this, there's this organisation, and someone will come round, and they will have a look, and they will work out what you've got at the moment.' That's the other thing, is people don't know. You'll ask them questions about their insulation and stuff, and they're just a bit vague. So, actually being able to say, 'Someone's going to come by, and they're actually going to look at what you've got and say, "Actually, I think you need this..."' (S2)

Another aspect that was valued was the time to be able to engage with energy companies, something that many stakeholders felt their advisors did not have capacity for:

The problem with ringing an energy company is, unless we've got an advisor-only helpline – some of the companies we do, but some of them we don't – and if you're going to then spend 45 minutes waiting for someone to pick up the phone, that is not a good use of our time when there's a whole load of other clients. (S2)

In addition to capacity and expertise, organisations also valued the access to fuel vouchers and various 'softer things' such as hot water bottles and draught excluders. Sometimes access to these was the initial reason for a referral into BHBH.

In the context of a well-established network of support organisations in Oxfordshire, the recent price rises in the energy market have meant that BHBH's contribution has been particularly timely:

I can be talking to people in the hospital, or I could speak to them in their home. It's not uncommon to hear a story of, 'Oh, I haven't really been turning the heating on, even in very, very cold weather, because I've heard a lot on the news about the cost-of-living crisis, about bills going up, and I've only got a small pension. I'm just a bit worried, so I won't turn the heating on.' Not great for people's health or comfort. So it's really helped us to have some specialist organisation to refer into that can give that person the advice about, maybe, what heating-related benefits they can claim to help with the cost of heating. (S3)

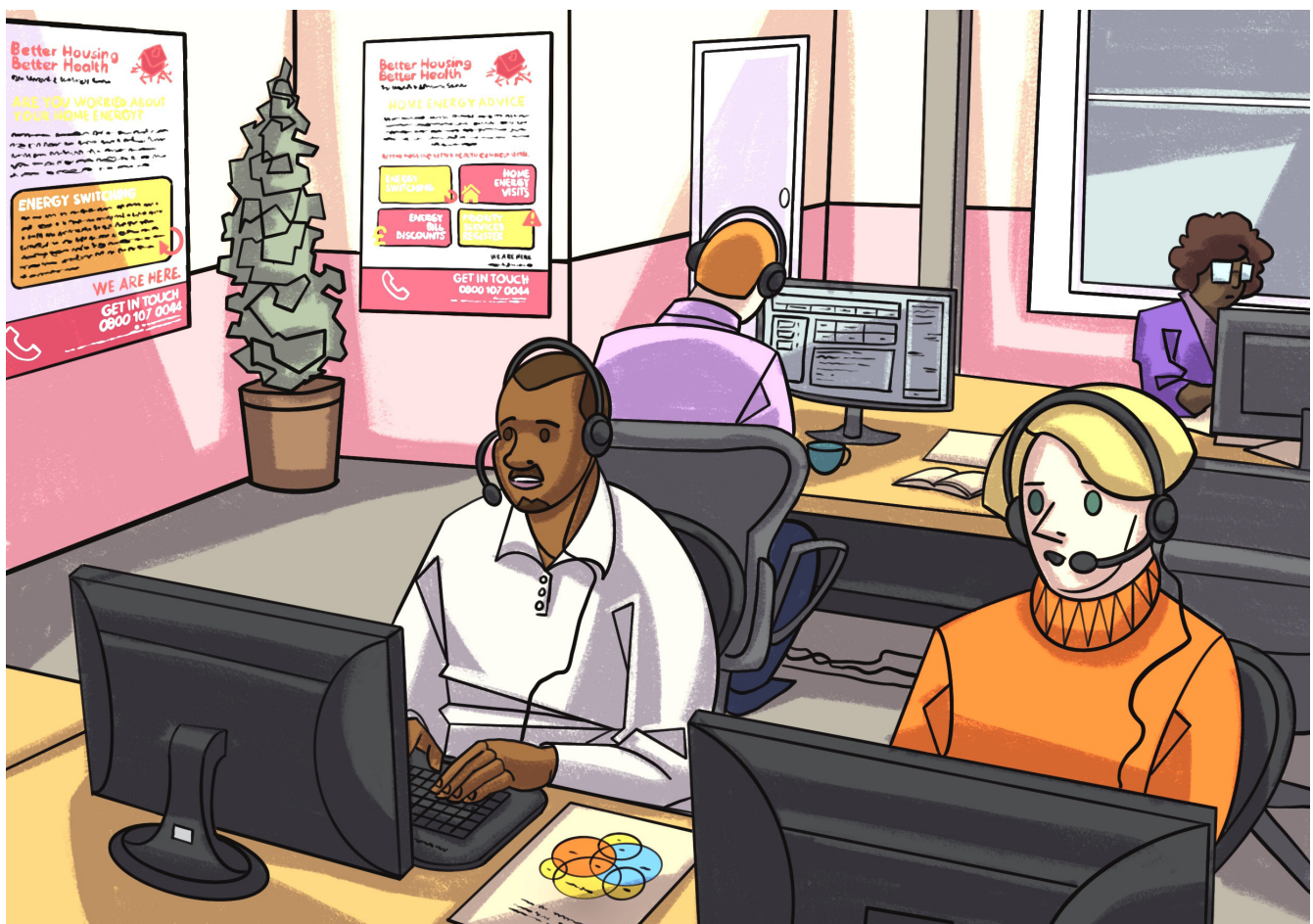


Figure 10 'No, not really. We just all know what's going on... After the first lockdown we've been office-based, and we've been seeing people since then. In our main office, as I'm looking around here I've got five people here with me, and we're all eavesdropping on each other, basically. That's how we know what's going on. We've got a wealth of knowledge. I've got a board up here behind me that's got lots of information up. We don't have a flow-chart, no! It's all in our heads.' (SH8)

7. Challenges in delivery

7.1 Referrals and promotion

One of the strengths of BHBH is its capacity to connect with the wide range of other services in Oxfordshire that seek to address various aspects of health and wellbeing and in some way connect with home and domestic life. One of the challenges to delivery is the extent to which the service relies on other organisations to help it identify clients.

Although stakeholder interviewees did mention that they refer into BHBH, some mentioned that they felt that they had not referred to the service as often as they might have or had got out of the habit. Some mentioned that participating in the research interview had prompted them to consider how they could start engaging more often with the service:

... perhaps we need to be a bit more proactive in using BHBH. It's a while since I spoke with [them]: probably a couple of years ago at least, when we first were aware of BHBH. It might be good to have another conversation with them, remind them that we're here and that, if we have an update of what they can offer, that might be quite useful. I think that from our point of view the more strings to our bow, the better. The more lines of help for our clients, the better. (S8)

Some discussed the challenges of managing referrals. One aspect of this is that BHBH is recognised to be operating over a larger than other local charities. For those local organisations, then, it may feel more appropriate, or be more practical, to refer to support organisations local to them. As a stakeholder implied here, they see an advantage in keeping resources locally:

We've also got this other organisation called [name], so, if we're thinking that people are struggling, we could refer them to that. That's free, and people go in, and they'll do an assessment to see whether the windows are closing properly, or draught excluders, and all that sort of thing. I know that also BHBH will do that, but I guess we're sort of relying on our more local charities. (S8)

Whilst BHBH was recognised as a valuable addition to the capacity of the network as a whole, then, stakeholders needed to weigh up whether they would connect with it or with organisations with a more local remit, where they existed.

When considering why partner organisations in Oxfordshire might not refer into BHBH as much as they could, communications issues were highlighted. One aspect of this was the extent to which other organisations understood the service being offered by BHBH. This interviewee implied that there were gaps in their knowledge:

I'm wanting someone to go round and actually have a look at their home, and at the insulation, and at the heating system, and talk to the client... My hope and my assumption is that what they're going to do is actually just have a look at how this home is heated, and how efficient is it, and are there quick wins, and are there not-so-quick wins, and ways of improving things? If we need to talk to the landlord, can we do that? (S2)

Stakeholder interviewees painted a picture of high-pressure environments in which they needed to make quick decisions regarding a large number of cases they were dealing with. They implied that this meant that they would refer on to organisations that were familiar to them at the time or 'top of their mind'. This could operate in a number of ways: one office had posters on the wall and had recently developed a digital equivalent of this. Staff at another organisation tended to all be working in the office and able to communicate to each other, giving reminders of the services available: (The interviewer had asked them if they have a flowchart for this purpose.)

No, not really. We just all know what's going on... After the first lockdown we've been office-based, and we've been seeing people since then. In our main office, as I'm looking around here, I've got five people here with me, and we're all eavesdropping on each other, basically. That's how we know what's going on. We've got a wealth of knowledge. I've got a board up here behind me that's got lots of information up. We don't have a flowchart, no! It's all in our heads. (S8)

This interviewee described the changing situation brought about by the Covid-19 lockdowns and the loss of the informal process of people reminding each other in the office and having posters on the wall:

Then we had the resources, and there was a very small team at the time, so we just remembered, had the poster up on the wall and would think, when it felt appropriate or came up in conversation, to promote that service to people who might find it helpful... Then I think that continued up until Covid, and then we went remote, and I think a lot of people just forgot about it because we didn't have that physical poster or reminder there. Then there was a changeover in the team as well around that time.

They also referred to being reminded about the service at a Making Every Contact Count session, highlighting the importance of such events in keeping people aware of BHBH:

So, now, when I did mention it to the team recently because I was at a Making Every Contact Count training session and there's a resource that's got Better Housing Better Health, which jogged my memory. (S13)

Another interviewee illustrated the ways in which changes in staffing and working culture make it challenging to keep this, and presumably other, schemes at the forefront of colleagues' minds:

I asked the team last week, 'Oh, by the way, who in the team's aware of Better Housing Better Health?', and there was one person that remembered it from before but said, 'I haven't done anything since Covid. I've not even mentioned it to anyone.' Then the rest of the team were like, 'No, we've never heard of it', and they're all the ones that had started in 2022, and we'd forgotten to tell them about this. (S8)

Suggestions for ways to keep BHBH on people's minds included a regular newsletter – *'if we had something each month come through from them, maybe, so they come through to the forefront of our list of people that we can use and contact'* (S8) – and posters, as well as digital resources that could be placed in a *'shared resource library'* (S13). BHBH was also visible at events, and it was felt that there were opportunities to do this more often. This interviewee implied that the culture of attending events had changed since the Covid-19 lockdowns and was something that could be reignited:

I think it would be good if it was advertised more. I know years and years ago we used to do – we used to go along to the electric blanket testing at the fire stations. BHBH would be there with us, handing out information and putting leaflets into people's electric blankets, once they'd been tested, to tell them about the service. We don't go along to those anymore either, so I don't know if BHBH do, but that's just such a useful thing, to be able to tell people about it, so a bit more advertising would be really useful. (S5)

One interviewee noted that these measures are particularly important for services such as BHBH that address issues that come up less regularly amongst the issues that many support organisations deal with: *'for the lesser-used ones, such as the Better Housing Better Health, that come up less regularly, it's a good reminder if they can visually see it'* (S13).

7.2 Providing help

One stakeholder, who worked directly with householders on energy issues, reflected on challenges of working with people who are struggling financially. The help that people most need, they commented, is increased income, and – aside from help with fuel debt or access to fuel vouchers for a limited duration – this is not something they can directly impact:

I think because increasing people's income is the least successful thing that we're able to do. We don't have very many options for that, and that is what the majority of people need. That's really difficult, to try and replace one kind of advice with, you know, to try and address a particular need with a different kind of solution. (S6)

Another noted that they often dealt with people who barely used the heating and were already very careful about energy efficiency in the home. This meant having to 'think on my feet', as they could not rely on conventional messages around saving energy:

They often don't put the heating on because they can't afford it, so I can't save them any money anyway. I can't say, 'Well, try to turn the heating down by one degree', in a home where people don't turn the heating on at all because they can't afford it. So I often find that all the training I had about bills, about saving energy and this and that, is just irrelevant in their home, and I have to think on my feet how to help people. (S7)

Another significant challenge on which stakeholders reflected related to being able to respond fully to householders' concerns within the context of the funding and support to which BHBH has access. This might mean, for example, a householder raising concerns about the heating system and the BHBH advisor being able to point them to a fund for boiler replacement for which they would be eligible.

Where advisors could see what the householder needed, they were not necessarily able to access their help. This interviewee expressed feeling powerless to help with, in this case, the provision of a new back door in order to reduce draughts:

There was another resident, who was elderly, and her house was incredibly cold, and the back door was broken and leaking the rain in. Again, that was a homeowner. In a situation like that, it would be lovely if there was some scheme or grant to replace the back door, but I don't think there is. So I can't replace the back door and I can't really signpost anywhere. This lady doesn't have money to replace the back door. It gets expensive, because people have a set income, and it's very rigid. (S7)

Advisors also commented on the complexity of the support systems they needed to operate within. Just as a householder had referred to the 'merry-go-round' above, this stakeholder interviewee referred to 'an endless road'. In this example, they described a situation in which a householder had asked for help through BHBH for '*cold home and high bills*', and the advisor had discovered that what he most needed was access to transport. He had needed to avoid the £25 payment for a bus pass, and he had reportedly been advised by the council to get a doctor's note. For this, he needed to pay £30, but the council had not accepted the letter. The advisor described their frustration:

So now this man spent £30. He could have spent it on the bus pass – £25 – but he spent it on that document, and that wasn't even accepted. Again, because the man is elderly and hard of hearing, he finds it very hard to communicate on the phone, and I thought he was doing very well making all this effort. He had multiple letters from the council, from the bus pass department, and yet he was getting nowhere, and I didn't know how to help him... So it's an endless road. (S7)

This householder followed up the visit with text messages asking for further help, and the advisor was frustrated that they could not address his situation but was at least able to suggest where to seek additional support with benefits, even though the householder still faced difficulties with transport:

'Oh, I'm so sorry to bother you, but help me. I have received a high bill again.' I'm thinking, what on earth can I do with those text messages? I can't help you with your high bill, because your house is insulated and basically your income is low. I advised you to go to Citizens Advice to go through a benefit check run-through. What are the benefits you hopefully are eligible for? The Citizens Advice said that this man has to come in person. He can't because he's spending endless amounts on buses. He can't afford it anymore because he needs that money on this high bill and he got absolutely nowhere with getting a bus pass. (S7)

Another aspect of this challenging context was that the funding would change over time, and this would affect what advisors could do and what support and/or equipment they could give to householders. In this example, they were waiting for new funding in order to be able to access warmth packs to give to householders:

So a hot water bottle is what they have already, and I do have a hot water bottle for them too as a part of the warmth pack, although we don't have that even now because we are waiting for new funding. So I'm actually without a warmth pack. I can't actually give people hot water bottles, hat, gloves. I can't do that. So what can I say in a house that has got no flooring and a lot of damp because it's not heated? It's very little. (S7)

8. Discussion

8.1 Householder experiences of poor housing conditions

In Section 3.2, we explored ways in which housing quality affected the health of our interviewees. Householders provided examples of where cold, hot, draughty, and damp conditions had an impact on their health. This affected their quality of life in the home and, when it affected wellbeing at work, outside it. The interviews add to and complement the existing evidence base on the relationship between housing, energy, and health, therefore emphasising the need for services like BHBH.

- Interviewees mentioned the effect of damp on their lungs, their breathing, and their mood and the tendencies for cold to intensify pain from arthritis and aggravate Crohn's disease and for symptoms of long Covid to be made worse through exposure to heat. These experiences of poor health directly related to the ability of the home and its heating and cooling systems to maintain a comfortable indoor temperature.
- We also heard about the ways in which financial stress related to energy costs can affect wellbeing and prompt householders to adopt coping mechanisms that affect quality of life: an example would be heating a child's room whilst the adults are in colder spaces. An example of the impact on household finances was when carers were using their holiday allowance to pay energy bills; there is a potential impact on mental and physical health from not being able to have time away from their duties.
- In addition to cold homes and financial stress, a further implication for health related to the impact of engaging in stressful and complex processes in trying to secure assistance, and potentially funding, to improve householders' homes.

8.2 Impacts of BHBH

Given this close relationship between health and housing, one approach to understanding the impact of BHBH is to value any efforts that help to improve homes, help people to be able to keep their home warm or cool, and/or reduce the stress people experience in relation to energy issues. These measures will be likely to have a positive impact upon health. Any service such as BHBH that can provide assistance in dealing with these issues and make

it easier for people to access support is likely to result in reduced stress for householders and also positively impact health.

As discussed in Section 5.2, a positive sign that the service has been able to improve conditions in homes was that interviewees reported receiving new information that, in many cases, they were able to act upon. Both of these aspects are important: the interviewees would not have known the information without the project and, because they were able to make changes as a result, these changes would impact their health. Examples of these changes include:

- making changes to behaviour, including switching off appliances when not in use and closing internal doors to keep the heat in;
- making changes to settings on heating and cooling systems, such as turning down the water temperature on a boiler – initial changes that would have an ongoing impact on energy costs; and
- making changes to the house, such as the installation of thermal blinds, that will mean that the home is more efficient.

Material changes to the fabric of the home were less evident, but in one example the advisor was able to help the household secure funding via Citizens Advice for new flooring, and this had ongoing implications for energy consumption.

Another way of viewing the positive contribution to health is through the ways in which people talked about how they felt following the support they received from BHBH (Section 5.4). People spoke about feeling empowered and better informed and about generally feeling a boost in their mental health or feeling more positive generally.

8.3 Acting on advice: challenges for householders

Householders appreciated and were able to act upon some of the advice they were given. Primarily, this concerned things they could do themselves in the home with little financial outlay, and, broadly speaking, this meant that householders appreciated this level of advice. For one

interviewee, however, the advice was at too basic a level. Although they would be able to follow it, they did not feel it would address the issues they were having.

People find it challenging to make changes to their homes. Owner-occupiers may struggle to find the cash to spend and may not be able to access funding opportunities. Private and social renters need to engage with their landlords, who may be unresponsive or slow.

Even in cases where BHBH had been able to recommend what was needed and had been able to liaise with the landlords, it had not always been able to ensure that the changes had been made (Section 5.3). Private landlords were not all unresponsive, and some had approached BHBH proactively, but it is clearly the case that some landlords are a barrier to making some of the changes needed in people's homes. Whether that is due to lack of interest, lack of empathy, limited funds, or other factors would be the subject of further research.

Social landlords, such as local authorities and housing associations, could also be problematic, and householders had found them sometimes slow to respond. In one example, the social landlord was reluctant to accept that structural changes were needed in the house, preferring to attribute issues to occupant behavioural change.

Householders sometimes reported being unable to respond to advice because changes in how they live in the home might affect family life. An example was where they were advised to close doors in the house to keep heat in the heated room(s) but the parent did not want their vulnerable child to be in the cold when walking around the rest of the house. It was also sometimes the case that householders were unable to physically apply measures: for example, if they had been given curtains or something else to install in the house but lacked the tools or skills and would have required some assistance.

One frustration amongst stakeholder interviewees (Section 7.2) was that advisors could not increase the income of the householders, except in a few cases where they might be able to help them access benefits. Fuel vouchers were useful but could not be relied upon as a way of boosting income.

Another reflection from stakeholders was that the vulnerable people they were visiting were often already consuming a low amount of energy as they were being frugal with the heating and already had a good knowledge of energy efficiency. This situation did not, however, discount the need for energy advice: a cold and underheated house is unlikely to be a healthy place to live.

Stakeholders also found it challenging that the funding landscape was uneven and variable. This meant that there might be money available for, say, boilers but not doors and that this would mean they were unable to provide the help needed at that moment.

8.4 Home visits alongside other support

The provision of home visits is a feature of BHBH and one that we were keen to understand the impact of (Chapter 4). The discussions with householders and stakeholders evidence the added value of home visits in comparison with other approaches, such as phone calls and online consultations.

To some extent, the advantage is a practical one in that vulnerable people do not need to travel to an office or centre for their advice session. For many with a insufficient budget for transport, limited access to public transport, and mobility challenges relating to disability, this is very welcome. For some, it will make the difference between attending the session or not, and the provision therefore helps to make the programme more inclusive. An additional, less tangible, aspect of this is the potential level of stigma or embarrassment associated with seeking help via a library or community centre: a home visit can feel like a more private matter.

Householders appreciated that someone had taken the time to come to their home and listen to them talk about the challenges they were having. This in itself was a mental health boost, and people reflected that they felt heard and supported. There was also a sense that home visitors could better have empathy with householders since they could experience the cold or damp home with them: the householder did not have to describe it in the abstract and assume the advisors could understand their situation. Comparisons were made with telephone consultations with other agencies, when householders had sometimes felt that helpline staff had not believed them or had not accepted the severity of their situation.

Relatedly, stakeholders saw home visits positively because they could get a better sense of the experiences of the householder and an accurate picture of their home. These were staff from organisations who either performed home visits themselves or referred on to BHBH in order for home visits to be delivered by it. They understood, and elaborated on the basis of their experiences, that householders were not always able or willing to accurately explain the situation in the home.

The reasons given for this were:

- householders did not recognise issues or know what to look for, an example being an immersion heater that was left running;
- they underestimated the severity or significance of issues they had noted in the house, an example being someone who had mentioned some mould growing under their bed;
- the householder did not want to make a fuss, but the home visit revealed the reality behind 'I'm managing absolutely fine'; or
- the visit required technical expertise that a householder could not reasonably be expected to have, such as inspecting the type and quality of insulation.

8.5 Impacts on referrers and the network of support in Oxfordshire

BHBH operates within an extensive network of organisations, and part of its impact stems from its contributions to the capacity and expertise of that network (Chapter 6). Our interviews with people in that network shed light on these contributions.

In its most basic sense, the contribution was the addition of capacity: more staff with time and resources to speak to and help people. Stakeholders valued being able to refer to BHBH as the service had dedicated time to spend on energy issues, therefore freeing up the time of other organisations to provide support in other areas of home and family life.

The picture is more complex, however, and the focus on energy is particularly important. There are a number of reasons for this:

- Firstly, energy can be a time-consuming issue to help with: home visits and calling utilities to negotiate debt and tariffs were two examples of this.
- Secondly, other organisations are less likely to have expertise around energy, particularly the more technical aspects. This meant that they valued having organisations on which they could rely to take on this element. Relatedly, they found that because volunteers come and go, so does expertise on energy. This made it particularly valuable that BHBH is a fully funded project that can provide continuity in the network.
- Thirdly, BHBH is able to be more proactive than some organisations, such as local authorities, which tended to use their capacity to respond reactively to issues rather than being able to think about investing in homes so that problems did not reoccur.
- Fourthly, BHBH is well connected with companies that could provide services to customers and to the funding landscape and were therefore more likely to be able to arrange practical measures for householders.
- Fifthly, and relatedly, BHBH has access to specific sources of help such as warmth packs and fuel vouchers, although access to these varies over time.

The important role that BHBH has established in the network is illustrated by two stakeholder comments: one that they think of BHBH when they hear about an energy-related issue, and another that if it were not for BHBH they would not know where to refer to when householders report concerns relating to cold homes and energy costs.

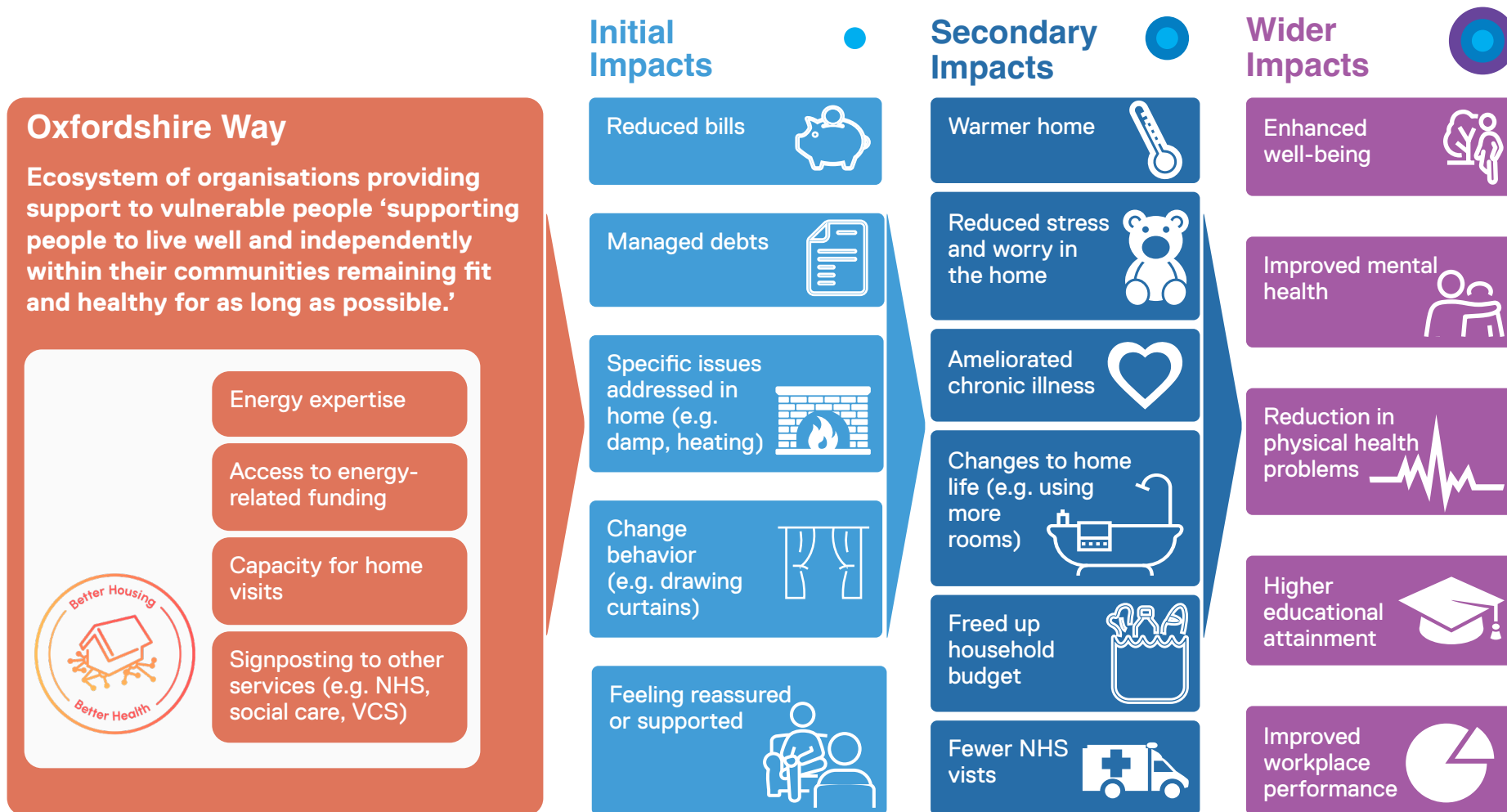


Figure 1 This logic diagram illustrates the potential impact of services, such as BHBH, that engage with householders on energy, debt, and related issues. Taking Oxfordshire as a specific case, it shows the way that BHBH contributes specific expertise, experience and capacity to the Oxfordshire Way ecosystem, therefore equipping the range of organisations to better engage with energy issues.

In presenting impacts in broad terms, we recognise the complexity of people’s lives and experiences as well as the interrelated nature of the network of support services. The impacts shown are those described or implied by our interviewees. Our qualitative research neither quantifies the scale of these impacts nor establishes mechanisms of causality.

9. Conclusions

Through in-depth qualitative research with vulnerable householders and stakeholders active in the wider ecosystem of advice and support in Oxfordshire, we have provided evidence of the need for, and role of, the BHBH service. We have added to the growing evidence base around indoor temperature and health. Whilst in the UK this is primarily an issue of cold conditions, hot weather and heatwaves also have an impact, and this is likely to increase with climate change.

In addition to cold and hot conditions, the stress of managing household finances takes its toll, as do stressful experiences of seeking advice and support through a complex ecosystem of services. These conditions and experiences point to a need for a service such as BHBH that is able to support individuals in understanding and mitigating their energy-related challenges.

It is difficult to ascertain the extent and nature of the impact of such a service, at least in a relatively short-term piece of research such as this one. Changes in health may take months and years to become clearly evident, and early indications of improvements may have less of an impact on longer-term conditions than initially thought. There is also likely to be a changing context in relation to personal and household life that makes it difficult to isolate the effect of one service.

Nevertheless, we found that our householder interviewees appreciated the advice and support they were given and were able to act on it to some extent. This is an indication that the service had an impact on them, although more research is needed to fully understand the scale and longer-term benefit. They told us that some of the information was new to them, and they therefore felt equipped to reduce their energy consumption and be more comfortable in the home. This related to changes to what they did in the home and, to a much smaller extent, to installation and modifications of material aspects of the home.

It is important to understand these changes in the context of the challenges residents faced in taking more substantial action. In particular, people had difficulty affording changes and sometimes lacked the skills or ability to make changes, e.g. elements of DIY like installing blinds. In some cases, services like BHBH could help to secure

funding, but this was something stakeholders told us was very challenging, particularly as the provision of grants and other support fluctuated: there might be funding for windows one month and boilers the next. Challenges were experienced across tenures: whilst homeowners struggled to afford to make changes, renters in both private and social housing often lacked agency and needed to rely on landlords to implement changes.

There is a broader impact of the service, and this relates to householders feeling supported, validated, listened to, and, to some extent, empowered. Home visits are important here: they provide householders with a chance to show advisors the issues they are experiencing in a way that would not be possible by telephone. This is likely to have important benefits for mental health and broader wellbeing.

Stakeholders also valued home visits. These helped them to get an accurate and comprehensive picture of the experiences of householders in their homes. This reduced the risk that householders underreported problems, whether as a result of not noticing them, underestimating them, or simply not wanting to cause a fuss. BHBH added a layer of capacity and expertise to the wider ecosystem of support available in Oxfordshire. The specific ability to deal with the detail of home energy was valued, as was the capacity to spend time conducting home visits and engaging with energy suppliers on behalf of householders.

The mental health and wellbeing benefits of the service is important and should be noted. They should, however, be understood in the context of the condition of homes and the affordability of energy. In order for services like BHBH to be able to effectively reduce fuel poverty, they need access to funding for measures such as upgrades to heating systems, insulation, doors, and windows. They also need to be able to offer practical support in implementing them.

Whilst our fieldwork has been limited to Oxfordshire, the findings resonate with the wider fuel poverty literature, and the insights outlined here will be of value to any organisations supporting householders on energy issues, as well as those developing policy around housing, energy, and fuel poverty.

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ISBN 978-1-912337-97-2