

Energise Westwood

Engaging Westwood in Energy Advice Final Report

March 2024

**Carbon
Co-op**

OBA Millennium
Cultural
Centre



**electricity
north west**



Funded by Electricity North West Limited.

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Executive Summary

The community around Westwood, like many others in the UK, are often considered ‘hard to reach’. There is a growing understanding that these communities, rather than being hard to reach, are often not reached out to.

This research seeks to better understand and connect with the community in Westwood, and to look at what the design of energy advice services with (rather than for) the community could look like.

With the onset of the energy crisis, this work is of utmost importance in contributing to the improvement of living conditions and lives of people in Westwood, a community that faces significant economic, housing and social inequalities. This work is relevant not only to Westwood, but for many similar communities across the UK.

Research Design and Methods

The research was designed with a consideration of the needs of both Electricity North West Limited (ENWL) and the Westwood Hub.

Research Aim:

To understand what support the community in Westwood needs in order to access energy advice and the role that Citizens Advice (CA) and the Westwood Hub can play in enabling this support.

The research methodology included a combination of desk research, interviews, focus groups and a stakeholder workshop. These research activities took place between September 2023 and January 2024.

Limitations include a short time frame, which meant extensive community surveys to get views from a wider section of the community was not possible. The value of this research is in delving deeper into the experiences and local expertise of those that participated in focus groups and interviews.

About Westwood

Westwood is located in the Coldhurst Ward of Oldham, on the western edge of Oldham city centre. It is a majority Bangladeshi community, described as a ‘tight community’ in which: “of course people know each other...” Staff Member, Westwood Hub.

Key economic and housing issues in the area include: Majority of housing are victorian-era terraces; A high proportion of social housing; A fifth of the households are overcrowded; and the median household income is £14,315 (one of the lowest in Oldham and the UK) and very high levels of energy vulnerability.

There are well established community organisations working in the area including the OBA Millenium Centre, Vision Youth and Community and Westwood Coldhurst Women’s Association (WCWA). These organisations are well trusted and work with hundreds of local people on a weekly basis.

Research Findings

The most significant issues impacting the community are damp and mould and managing energy bills.

A number of specific factors were identified that impact this community's experience of the UK energy crisis. These are:

- Informal Private Rental Sector (PRS)
- Newer European Bangladeshi migrants
- Attitude of 'suffer in silence'
- Gender dimension
- Newness of energy issues.

Some people in the area were identified as **renting informally** from family or family friends. Without contracts, those in challenging situations find it harder to reach out to 'official' support providers.

The research also highlighted that due to Brexit there has been an increase in newer **Bangladeshi migrants** from Europe. These migrants have less familiarity with UK systems and spoken English skills. Staff at the Westwood Hub have found that they are supporting these newer migrants in the way that they had supported their community twenty years ago. These newer migrants need additional support to access energy advice services.

There is an attitude of '**suffer in silence**' in the community as many do not want others in the community to know they are struggling financially. Many are less willing to accept charity. This means households often get to a crisis point before seeking out help. A proactive rather than reactive approach to the delivery of energy advice is essential to meet this challenge.

Household incomes are often (but not always) managed by men and the mental stress of higher energy costs is felt differently between men and women. A **gender sensitive approach** to delivering energy advice is needed in this community.

The **newness of the energy crisis** and unfamiliarity of living in damp and cold conditions for some households mean that many people do not know where to find help, or even that help is available. Many also do not know how to manage moisture and ventilation leading to a significant damp and mould crisis.

Where to find help for energy issues?

Broadly there was a feeling that people do not know what to do or where to go, to solve energy problems.

Participants in the focus group named that they looked first to family and social media for support on energy issues. After these other key institutions included the library, food bank, council and other places.

Citizens Advice was understood as somewhere to go for help with housing, immigration or benefits. Most did not consider it a place to go to with their energy-related problems.

Accessibility

The accessibility of different types of advice formats was discussed. We learnt that for those most at risk accessing face-to-face services is very valuable, even though offering flexibility of contact points, such as WhatsApp, online and phone agents, was also appreciated to help manage the ability to access advice with work and childcare responsibilities.

Perceptions of Citizens Advice being challenging to access, were very high:

“It’s long winded getting support from them [Citizens Advice]. You have to make an appointment first and that’s already a barrier for people.” -

Facilitators Notes

These perceptions, whether true or not, present a barrier to accessing support services available.

One staff member spoke about his perception of the community’s perspective of mainstream support services. He believes they are seen as less personal, less accessible, and do not appreciate the sense of embarrassment that people in the community feel toward coming forward to ask for support.

Any work in this area needs to take this into account, and build relationships with the local community to address and change perceptions.

Accessing support from Citizens Advice

Participants accessed Citizens Advice services between focus group sessions and fed back on their experience. The results of this exercise can be read within the Appendices.

Key findings:

- Providing multiple contact options is convenient.
- Signposting is valued, direct referral is preferred.
- Timely follow up is important for morale.
- Data collection upfront creates barriers.
- People need additional support to put to use the information offered.

- Consider support to owner occupiers on damp and mould issues.
- Face-to-face support builds trust and confidence.
- Offering translation services is highly valuable.

Visioning an ideal Westwood Energy Advice Service

Advisors being ‘alongside’ those seeking support was identified as a key element of a Westwood Energy Advice Service. Crucially, newer European Bangladeshis and older people find understanding and navigating UK systems a challenge, and also face issues in terms of digital exclusion.

“A lot of people don’t have the capacity to call up and actually talk to customer service and get their problems resolved.” -

Staff Member, Westwood Hub.

Other key aspects of an ideal support service were explored in a stakeholder workshop with ENWL and local CA branches. Focus group participants developed recommendations for both the Westwood Hub and Citizens Advice. These can be read in section four.

Roles for Westwood Hub and Citizens Advice

During the stakeholder workshop with local CA branches, ENWL and Carbon Co-op, it became clear that there is interest in collaboration between these organisations due to their complementary strengths and weaknesses.

The potential for working in collaboration to provide an effective service locally was felt strongly by the key partners. This is thanks to the Westwood Hub being particularly skilled at proactive and sensitive outreach within the community; Citizens Advice local branches having an established advice service and offering well rounded support, and Carbon Co-op being experienced at leading community workshops and peer education on energy issues.

Conclusion

Westwood, like many other communities across the UK, face significant economic, housing and social inequalities. People in these communities are at risk of significant health and wellbeing impacts from the energy crisis and in particular from living in cold, damp and mouldy housing conditions. To meet the needs of these communities a culturally sensitive and proactive approach is essential.

Through collaboration, local partnerships could become more effective at meeting the needs of the community than if these organisations operated in silos. There is interest from the organisations involved in this research in the collaboration potential, which is currently being explored.

1. Introduction

In 2021-2022, Carbon Co-op worked with twelve community champions from Westwood through [Oldham Energy Futures](#) to develop their own Community-Led Energy Plans (CLEP). This in-depth champions programme led the group to identify the need for better tailored energy advice within their community.

Carbon Co-op has been working with the Westwood Hub to support its community through the energy crisis. In parallel to this process, Electricity North West Limited (ENWL) are working with Citizens Advice (CA) and the Energy Savings Trust (EST) to deliver Take Charge, an energy advice service. ENWL is particularly interested in understanding the barriers for communities like Westwood in engaging with Take Charge and other mainstream energy advice services.

Thus this research has come about through the dual needs of both ENWL and the Westwood Hub in understanding and delivering energy advice for this community and others like it so no one is left behind.

With the onset of the energy crisis, this work is of utmost importance in improving living conditions and the lives of people in Westwood, a community that faces significant economic, housing and social inequalities. This work is relevant for not only Westwood, but many similar communities across the UK.

The research has been funded by ENWL and supported by the staff at the Westwood Hub.



2. Research Design and Methods

Research Design

In consideration of both the needs of ENWL and the Westwood Hub in terms of research outcomes the following research aim and questions were formulated.

Research Aim

To understand what support the community in Westwood need in order to access energy advice, and the role that Citizens Advice and the Westwood Hub can play in enabling this.

Research Questions

1. What energy challenges do people in Westwood experience?
2. Where do people go to access support for their energy challenges?
3. Do people have unmet needs around energy challenges?
4. What roles could the Westwood Hub and Citizens Advice play in enabling community members to get help for their energy challenges?

The Capability Opportunity and Motivation Behaviour Change model (COM-B) has been utilised through the development of interview questions, focus group exercises and in analysing the research results.

See interview questions, focus group session plans and COM-B analysis in the Appendices.

The COM-B framework looks to understand why people do or do not undertake certain target behaviours through understanding their capability, opportunity and motivations. The COM-B framework was developed in 2011 by psychologist's Susan Michie, Maartje van Stralen, and Robert West in response to the limitations of previous behavioural change models. See Michie et al (2014) for more on COM-B and the behaviour change wheel.

Methods

The research was conducted between September 2023 and January 2024. It involved:

- Desk based research to understand what is on offer through national and local energy advice services.
- Two interviews with Westwood Hub staff
- Two community focus groups with a homework task to access support from Citizens Advice. Within the sessions the group was split into male and female groups.
- A questionnaire completed by focus group participants
- A stakeholder workshop involving local CA branches, ENWL and the Westwood Hub.

The focus groups were designed using participatory appraisal techniques (Chambers, 2002). Participatory appraisal is a technique widely used in the global south and more commonly now in the UK to support the co-design of services in the health, education and many other sectors. It uses non verbal forms of interaction such as visual and movement methods, for example: drawing, placing sticky dots to rank items, moving cards or moving around the room to indicate responses. This enables accessibility and inclusiveness, particularly when participants are less confident in their spoken and written skills.

It is an empowering research method that values local expertise and encourages discussion, learning and decision making between peers.

Limitation

Due to the short timeframe it was not possible to undertake more extensive community surveys to get views from a wider section of the community. However the value of this research is in delving deeper into, and therefore understanding with stronger sensitivity, the experiences and local expertise of those that participated in focus groups and interviews.

The short time frames meant that there was one week between the two focus groups. Thus the experience of the community in accessing support from Citizens Advice can only be assessed as their experience of first contact, as opposed to assessing the experience of those accessing Citizens Advice support over a longer time period.

When setting the homework task we asked participants which format of support they accessed, i.e. phone, online, in person etc. An oversight was the omission of asking participants which service they accessed support from, i.e. which local branch of CA or the national organisation. The results will have to be understood as general feedback to the CA services as a whole, as opposed to specific feedback to the local CA branches.

Participant demographics

	Interviews with staff	Focus Groups with householder members of the community
Number of participants	2	12
Gender	1 x Female 1 x Male	6 x Female 6 x Male
Ethnicity	2 x British Bangladeshi	10 x British Bangladeshi 2 x White English
Number of people in household	N/A	2 x 2-person household 1 x 3-person household 4 x 4-person household 3 x 5-person household 1 x 6-person household 1 x 7-person household

3. About Westwood

Westwood is in the Coldhurst Ward of Oldham, on the western edge of Oldham city centre. Westwood is made up of industrial and commercial factories and warehouses alongside residential properties.

There are a significant number of Victorian-era terraces (45%). Almost half of residents in Coldhurst (46%) are **social housing tenants**, with 40% owner occupiers and 12% private renters (ONS census data 2011). Over a fifth (22%) of households are **overcrowded**, this is against an Oldham average 7.5% (Oldham Council, 2019).

The majority of residents are **British Bangladeshi** 60% (compared to 7% in Oldham and 1% England, ONS Census 2011) and around a fifth of households (22%) have no residents who speak English as their main language.

The median household income is £14,315, which represents the **lowest income levels in Oldham** (Oldham average - £22,289), and half of the UK average - £32,300 (Oldham Council, 2019).

There are **high levels of fuel poverty**, in the ward with 19% homes in fuel poverty as of 2019 (Oldham Council, 2019). This figure has undoubtedly risen since the 2021 energy crisis. It is also worth noting that these figures are based on official definitions of fuel poverty, which have repeatedly changed over the last ten years. Irrespective of definitions of fuel poverty, it is likely that many more people are energy vulnerable and impacted by the energy crisis in this ward.

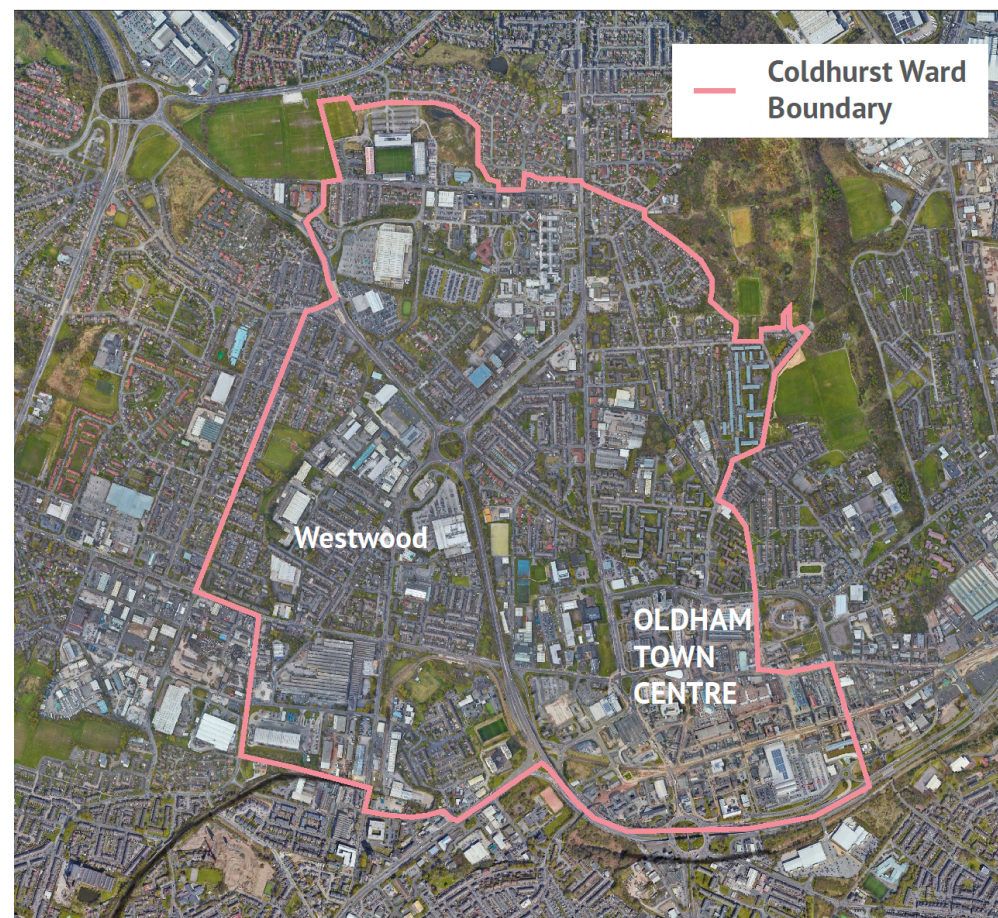


Fig. 1: Coldhurst Ward Boundary, with the location of Westwood identified on the left.

Westwood Hub

“This is the central home people are familiar with in Westwood.”

Staff Member, Westwood Hub

The Westwood Hub consists of three key organisations:

- OBA Millennium Centre: the building, established in 2002.
- Vision Youth and Community: youth sports charity, established in 2006.
- Westwood Coldhurst Women’s Association (WCWA): women’s empowerment organisation, established in 1990.

These organisations are well established in the community and receive hundreds of unique visitors every week. The users are predominantly British Bangladeshi and to a smaller extent British Pakistani.

“[The Millenium Centre] is the main hub where people come to get information, get advice, and support. We run exercise classes for ladies, sports for men, children’s sports activities over the weekend. It’s all about engaging people. Getting them to improve their physical and mental health and well-being...”

Staff Member, Westwood Hub

A staff member at WCWA explains that they provide:

“mental health and well-being support. We offer [women only] classes and sessions... weekly coffee mornings... exercise classes. If they need to talk privately, we provide that confidential service, and make referrals.”

“[It is] very, very easy for us to engage and reach out to people.”

Staff Member, Westwood Hub

By the community, for the community

A key defining feature of the Westwood Hub is that it is run by the community, for the community. This means that staff within the centre are familiar with the culturally specific factors that are discussed in section four and are well placed to provide **sensitive and crucially proactive support**. As the manager of the Millenium Centre explains:

“It’s not a one solution fits all situation, you have to work with individuals and families and everybody reacts differently. Some people might be like, “you know what, I really need help. Can I have it?”... Other people might need it [help] and not ask, you’ve got to paint it a different way.”

Tight community

“Yeah, yeah look, listen we’re a tight community, of course people know each other... Everybody’s all living in the same area. They do shopping from the same Asian cash & carries... women and men know each other from schools and from the mosque.” Staff Member, Westwood Hub

This tight community has a double edge to it. While it means that information about support services available spread quickly through word of mouth to those who need support, it also makes it **difficult for people seeking support to come forward publicly**, as they would not want others to know they are struggling.

“...people say “How are you, you alright? Ohh, then what are you doing here?” Do you know, it’s just a cultural thing where people just sort of want to know other people’s business.” Staff Member, Westwood Hub

We will look in more depth at this and other cultural specific factors that impact the delivery of energy advice.

Westwood’s experience of the Energy Crisis

The diagram below (Fig 2) shows the typical way in which the energy crisis has impacted many in the UK on low incomes. The impact of this journey is a decline in mental and physical health as well as increases in food and fuel poverty. In the worst cases this is a fatal issue.

In this research we examine the impact of the energy crisis in the specific locality of Westwood. Through the research we were able to identify five key factors that compound the impact of the energy crisis that need to be taken into account when designing energy support strategies.

1. Informal Private Rental Sector
2. Newer European Bangladeshi migrants
3. Attitude of ‘suffer in silence’
4. Gender dimension
5. Newness of energy issues

In the next section, we look at what key energy issues the community faces. Then taking the Westwood specific issues in turn, we explore how these factors impact the community and its access to energy advice.

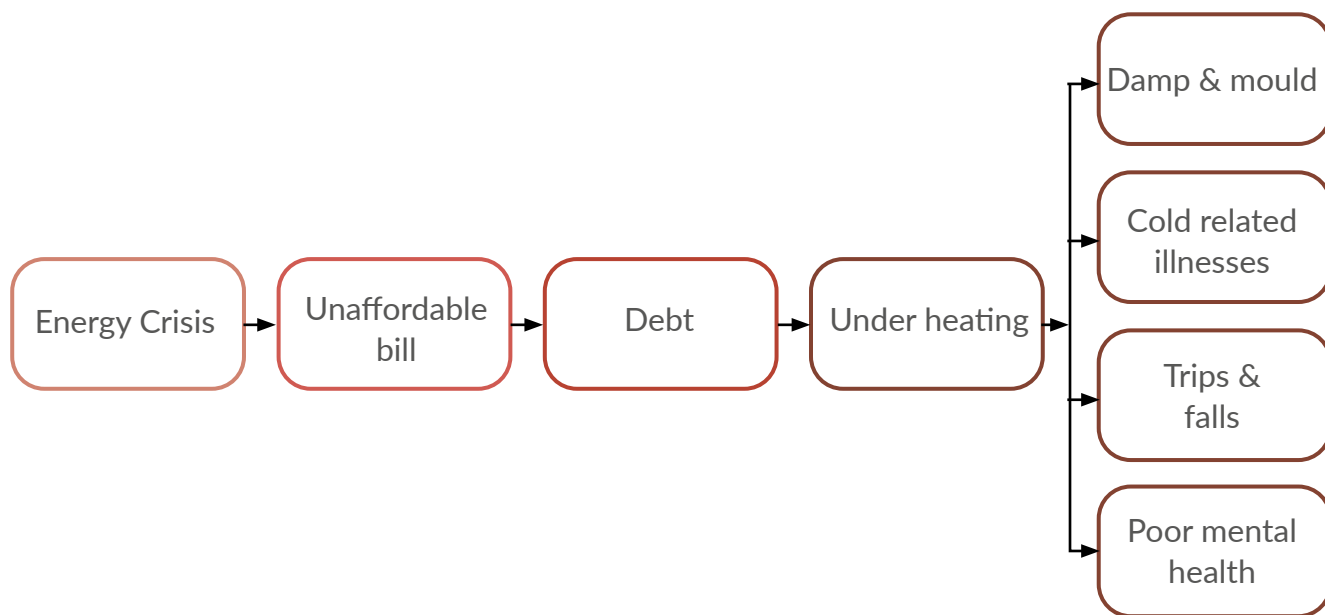


Fig. 2: A diagram showing the resulting impacts of the energy crisis on many in the UK.



4. Research Findings

What are the challenges?

The biggest problems identified by the focus group and the staff at the Westwood Hub are damp and mould in homes and the cost of energy bills. These were identified as both the most common and most severe issues facing the participants and their community.

"You have a geographic location, which is heavily populated with a demographic of people who are from the British Bangladesh background, and they are on low income. So something's got to give, normally what that means is you use the heating less"

Staff Member, Westwood Hub

"The number one issue that I have as a councillor from residents is around damp, mould and water leakages in the homes... the second thing is around... not understanding the billing system."

Staff Member, Westwood Hub

"We really need to get to grips with the mould and the damp issue because it is a life-threatening issue"

Staff Member, Westwood Hub

One focus group participant spoke about her experience working in a local estate agent. A common problem when inspecting properties is **damp and mould**, with landlords and tenants regularly getting into **disputes**.

Importantly, the participant mentioned that she did not feel that renters or the estate agents had good quality information on how to manage the problem of damp and mould. She identified estate agents as being a useful organisation to work with when delivering advice on damp and mould.

The perceived **lack of drop in centres** was identified as difficult. Particularly for those less able to access digital resources, older people or newer European Bangladeshi migrants.

There was a strong **sense of futility** around the cost of energy bills. One participant commented that:

"They dictate, and we pay, there's no control."

- Facilitators Notes

A prevalent attitude in the group was the sense that: you get money by working, Citizens Advice is not going to give you money so there's no point getting in touch.

Some spoke of contacting energy suppliers and said that they can put you on a payment plan, but this was seen as a short term solution. With some participants explaining that switching did not make much of an impact any more.

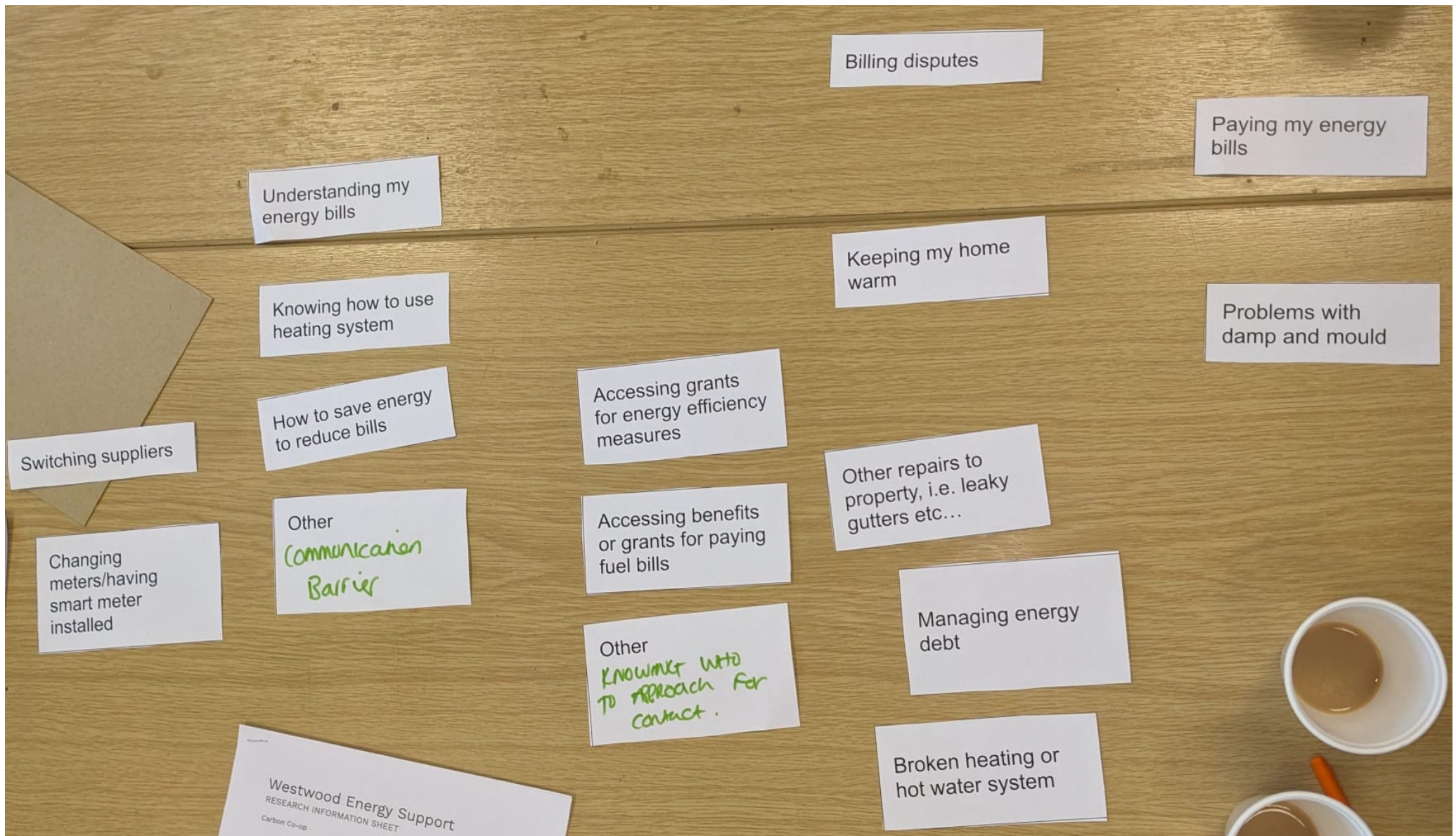


Fig. 3: The picture above shows the arrangement of energy issues by focus group participants, with the biggest issues on the right hand side and smallest issues on the left hand side.

Biggest problems	Big problems	Mid-range problems	Smaller problems	Smallest problems
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Problems with damp and mould• Paying my energy bills	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Billing disputes• Keeping my home warm• Other repairs to property i.e. leaky gutters• Managing energy debt• Broken heating or hot water system	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Accessing grants for energy efficiency measures• Accessing benefits or grants for paying for fuel bills• Knowing who to approach for contact [help]	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Understanding my energy bills• Knowing how to use heating system• How to save energy to reduce bills• Communications barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Switching suppliers• Changing meters/having smart meter installed.

Fig. 4 The table above shows energy issues arranged by participants from biggest to smallest problems.

The first point of call at the start of the energy crisis was to **borrow money from family** to pay increased energy bills. However they noted that as the bills keep coming month after month there is only so much debt they can take on with their family, and these mounting debts have brought pressure and stress.

Participants spoke about coping through buying less food and not using the heating.

There was consensus that the issue feels out of their control and the government was mentioned as needing to do more on the cost of living crisis. One person said:

"You can think about it a lot, but coming up with solutions is hard, and the money side is difficult." Facilitators Notes

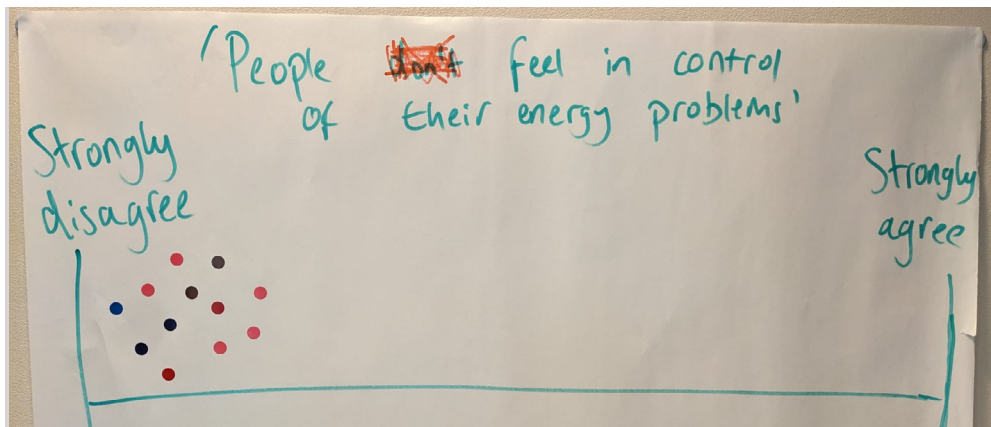


Fig. 5 Picture above shows group exercise in which everyone felt that energy issues felt out of their control.

Informal Private Rental Sector

Around 12% of residents in Coldhurst ward are private renters. One staff member at the Hub describes the informality of some parts of the sector:

"He doesn't have any sort of tenancy agreement. It is dead weird but there's a lot of people who are in that position... he would not ask for help from anyone..."

Another interviewee recalls visiting a resident's home:

"I remember, the water was literally leaking from the attic down into the ground floor, onto the passageway, where you enter the property, and she has, bless her, seven kids. Obviously the mother and the father living in a two bedroom property is completely overcrowded and the landlord [had] not fixed the property up."

A poorly regulated, and at times, informal Private Rental Sector means that there are **no contracts, landlords could be family members** or friends of the family. The social relations involved in the rental sector in this community complicates a tenant's ability to gain access to support in the situation of disputes or when requesting repairs for housing conditions and damp and mould issues.

In the case of informal arrangements, **tenants assume they have no legal rights** and are unlikely to reach out to official providers for support. This is an additional burden on top of issues that many tenants face in fearing evictions if seen to be raising problems for the landlord.

Newer European Bangladeshi migrants

“a lot of migrants are coming from Italy, France and all the European countries to the UK especially before Brexit... the same issues that we had 20 years ago, in terms of language issues, IT... is still ongoing because there's a new influx of migrants... European Bangladesh, as we like to call them.” - Staff Member, Westwood Hub.

“there's a lot of what I would call digital poverty... the new migrants who are coming in are not learned in the way of it and are not IT literate” - Staff Member, Westwood Hub

Key issues in this newer wave of migration include challenges around:

- Low levels of UK systems and processes literacy
- Digital exclusion
- Limited spoken or written english
- Different dialect to the older settled British Bangladeshi migrant community

In terms of energy support, the needs of these newer migrants are more significant. Low levels of digital literacy and spoken English mean people face challenges in understanding bills, calling energy suppliers, using emails and understanding how to navigate the support that is available.

Attitude of ‘suffer in silence’

“Culturally the issue we have is, people won't come and ask for help. They will literally suffer in silence. They have that sense of shame and pride and they'll be too embarrassed to ask. They just won't use heating, they'll just stay in a cold house rather than say ‘Can I have some money for energy?’”

Staff Member, Westwood Hub

A clear theme of the interviews with Westwood Hub staff was the sense of shame or embarrassment members of the community feel, in showing publicly that they were struggling financially. The interviewees described a strong social pressure to present themselves as doing well, and a sense of embarrassment to accept ‘charity’.

This attitude limits opportunities to gain support and leads to housing and energy issues getting to a crisis point before those impacted reach out for help.

“It's frustrating because they come to me as the last port”

Staff Member, Westwood Hub

“They’re literally at a crisis point, [and] they think I just contact the counsellor and then they have the expectations of, ‘she’ll get it done quickly.’”

Staff Member, Westwood Hub

Any local service needs to take this strong cultural factor into account in the design of its services. Staff interviewed displayed both a **proactive and sensitive approach** to the way they reach out to the community.

One staff member describes identifying struggling families through children at the summer holiday clubs. They use this as an opportunity to offer crisis support to those who would not reach out and ask for help themselves:

“When the parents would come up to pick up the kid we would be like, ‘We’ve got this extra food, just take it with you, you will be doing us a favour... [They would say] No, no we don’t want to. We’re okay, we’re okay.’ But then you could see that they’re really chuffed and happy that they’ve got it, but it didn’t feel like it’s a charity or something that they’ve asked for, you understand? It’s just we proactively do that.”

This proactive and sensitive approach is key to managing this issue of ‘suffering in silence’, and is a key factor for the design of a locally effective energy advice service.



Gender dimension

“...especially if there’s a male household member he will be like ‘why can’t he support his own household?’” -

Staff Member, Westwood Hub

“People are embarrassed to admit that they are struggling to pay their bills especially if it’s males that come to me.” -

Staff Member, Westwood Hub

It was apparent in the interviews and focus groups that typically (but not always) men take on financial issues within a household and find it harder to reach out for support. **The mental load and stress of paying for energy bills and debt was repeatedly raised within the men’s focus group.**

The strain on women in a family setting is highly likely to be present, and would likely manifest itself in different ways to the men in the household. However it was not something spoken about by women within the focus groups or within the interviews.

While this is a challenging dynamic, staff at the Hub spoke of ways in which they reach out to families they know are struggling through women involved in WCWA:

“So his wife, had she been involved with WCWA, that’d be the best way to approach it. Rather than approaching him, she would be a lot more open to being asked “look how you guys doing at home?””

A gender sensitive approach within the context of this community is important to consider in the design of a local energy advice service.

New Issue

The relatively recent nature of the energy crisis, and less familiarity of living in damp and cold conditions for some households, means that many do not know where to find help, or even that help is available.

Focus group participants described not being familiar with how to manage homes in the wet and damp conditions found in the North West. For example, the participant who works in an estate agent said many tenants are not aware they need to keep windows open to ventilate their bathrooms after taking hot showers.

Given the newness of the issue, and behavioural change aspects, additional attention should be paid to peer education and awareness raising.

Overarching feeling of stress and futility

Within the focus group, when asked if energy problems feel easy to think about, the group was split. Some felt that it is easy to think about because everyone is struggling with it, it's on everyone's mind and so widespread.

However those that disagreed felt that it was stressful and overwhelming to think about. Anxiety, depression and isolation were mentioned as impacts.

One participant said:

"People switch off. People go quiet on you, when they are stressed out."

Facilitators Notes.

Smart metres (specifically the In Home Display) were mentioned as contributing to mental health issues. One person mentioned that he found it very stressful watching the amount of money being spent on energy everyday.

The media and 'scary headlines' were also mentioned as contributing to poor mental health. This issue of stress as mentioned above has a gendered dimension to take into account.

In considering Westwood's energy challenges it is key that the local and culturally specific factors discussed above are factored into the design of services.

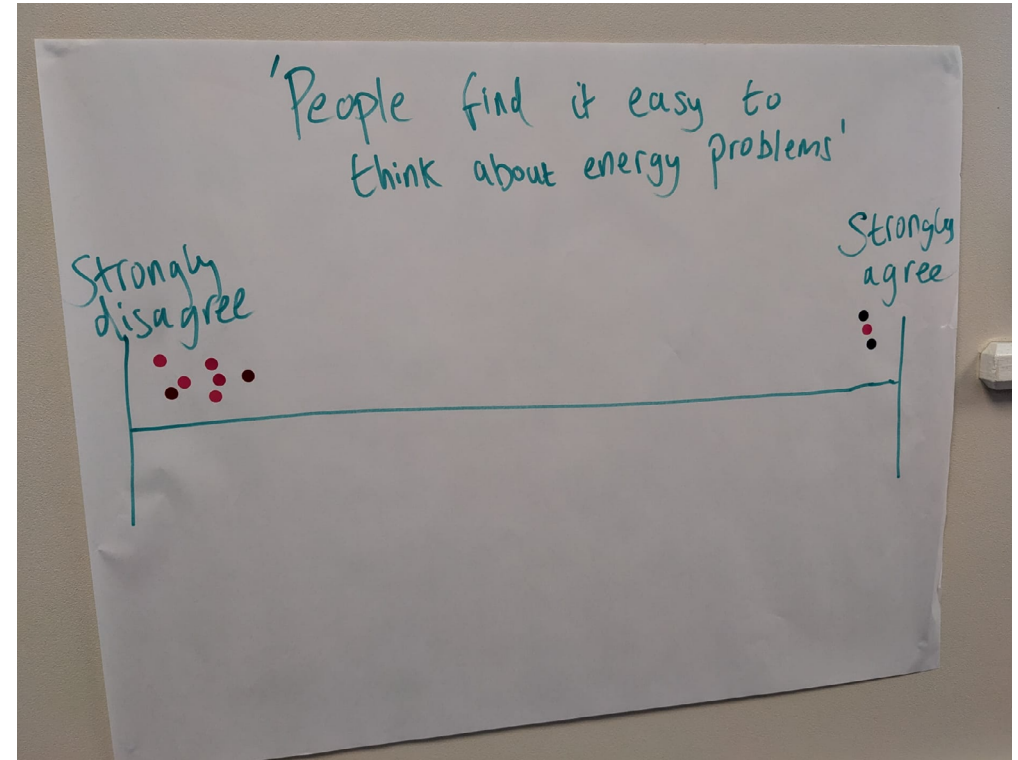


Fig 6: Shows divergent views on how easy participants find it to think about energy problems.

Who do people turn to for support?

"I don't think people know where to go, [or] who to go to. Obviously, for things like jobs and employment, they know, for example, they can go to the job center... In terms of energy help... I don't think they have that knowledge. Even though as a council we've produced a leaflet with the list of organisations that can help them."

- Staff member, Westwood Hub

There was an overwhelming consensus from the focus groups that people do not know what to do or where to go to solve energy problems (see Fig 7). Focus group participants spoke about not being aware of who to contact to get support and what kind of support is available.

Conversely when information is made available to the community, for example access to boiler grants, information spreads very quickly. The spreading of useful information via word of mouth is very strong in the community and is something that should be utilised in the design of energy advice services for Westwood.

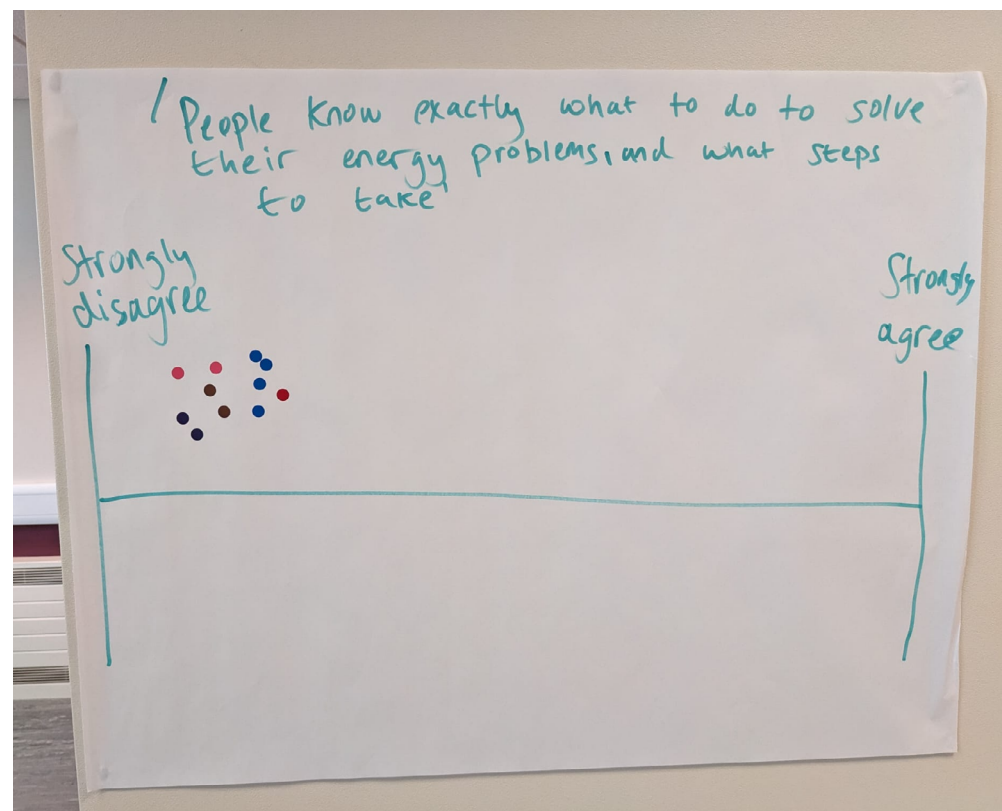


Fig 7. Shows participants' sense of whether they know what to do to solve their energy problems and what steps to take.

Family first

When the focus group explored who they would go to ask for help there was a strong consensus that the first point of call would always be **family** followed by a strong emphasis on **self-help**.

"It's very normal to borrow money from family members and friends."

- Staff Member, Westwood Hub

Staying positive was mentioned as well as practical strategies to help their family, for example hot water bottles and extra warm pyjamas. Using avenues to educate themselves such as **google, youtube**, and other social media was also mentioned. Although it was also mentioned that dangerous solutions like using candle burners to keep warm circulate on TikTok and other social media outlets.

For some people the **welfare rights department** at the council was a first port of call. When discussed some said they thought the ability to access this may be based on age, being something older people would do more often.

Other places mentioned include: the **library, Oldham Council** (it was mentioned that the Council gave winter packs through the Westwood Hub last year), **workplace support hub** and the **foodbank**.

The group understood Citizens Advice as more appropriate to contact for issues such as immigration rights and benefits, whereas the council or energy suppliers came to mind when thinking about energy bills issues.

When asked about going to their **councillors** there was a mixed response, with some describing that they had lost faith in their councillors.

The participant who works at an **estate agent** mentioned that they could have a role in supporting tenants and landlords to understand damp and mould issues, this is not something currently offered.

Others mentioned were: tradesmen, community centres and community leaders.

Who to trust

One person was annoyed about cold calling of companies who offer boiler grants and insulation:

"you call up to find out if you can access it but find your boiler is not old enough." Facilitators Notes

It was felt that their time was wasted and they didn't know if the company was legitimate. There was also worry about the impact on vulnerable people. There was also little trust of energy companies, it was felt that they:

"...don't give advice on how to save money, because they want to make money out of you." Facilitators Notes

When asked about whether they would trust advice given at the Millenium Centre and Citizens Advice, both were felt to be trustworthy.

Accessibility of existing energy advice

“He was forever reading and not finding the specific thing he was looking for.” Facilitators Notes

The accessibility of different energy advice formats was dependent on various factors including age, childcare or work constraints, how recently someone had moved to the UK and how familiar or not with UK processes they were. This last point is linked to language, with newer migrants being less likely to have English as a main language.

There was an overall emphasis on **face-to-face drop in sessions** being more accessible to those with poor English language skills, newer European Bangladeshi and the elderly. This is due to these groups not being digitally literate.

“I mean face-face without doubt [would be the most accessible format for advice], followed by phone calls, WhatsApp and then right at the bottom, if there’s a minus 1 million, it’d be emails.” - Staff member, Westwood Hub

Focus group participants spoke of the lack of in-person drop-in advice services compared to pre-pandemic, and this was seen as challenging. One person commented that when getting support face-to-face you can see the body language of the advisor, and this gives you both confidence in thinking about how to deal with the issue and it **builds trust**.

Staff gave an example of how they often send emails on the behalf of people who really struggle to understand how to send emails.

WhatsApp was agreed to be much more accessible, even for the older generation.

“A lot of people, especially the new migrants... are not IT literate”

Staff member, Westwood Hub

Working mothers felt that using online agents or WhatsApp would be more convenient, with phone and drop-in sessions being more challenging in terms of having the time to access support.

The potential for door knocking to be used as a way to deliver energy advice and support was discussed. The group was clear that door knocking activities would have to be gender sensitive. In particular it was mentioned that single women would not open the door to men.

Perceptions of **Citizens Advice being challenging to access were very high**.

“It’s long winded getting support from them [Citizens Advice]. You have to make an appointment first and that’s already a barrier for people.”

Facilitators Notes

One person felt that the drop-in session would be so full that they thought they would wait and waste their time not getting seen. There was also a perception that there would be language barriers faced by attending Citizens Advice.

One staff member speaks about what he thinks is the community's perspective of mainstream support service. He believes they are seen as less personal, less accessible, and do not appreciate the sense of embarrassment that people in the community feel toward coming forward to ask for support:

"[More formal support services are described as] you come and ask us, we'll do some forms with you, we'll do a consultation with you, and then we'll decide if you can get support." ...straight away that puts a barrier and a lot of people won't want to come."

These **perceptions, whether true or not, present a barrier** to accessing support services available. Any work in this area needs to take this into account, and build relationships with the local community to address and change these perceptions.

Box 1 - Accessing Support from Citizens Advice: Headlines from results of homework task

See full summary of results in the Appendices.

Focus group participants were asked to access Citizens Advice services specifically on their energy issues, over a week period, and report back on their experience.

Key learning:

- **Different contact options** including WhatsApp are very convenient. Especially for managing childcare/work constraints.
- **Signposting is valued, direct referral is preferred.** A council tenant was signposted to the council for support with resolving damp and mould issues and valued being signposted to the council. He did comment that it was challenging to find the number himself and would have appreciated being put through to the correct person at the council more directly.
- **Timely follow up is important.** Many participants were told they would be sent an email but did not receive them over the week period between focus group sessions. This led to a drop in morale for many after initial excitement that they may be able to find help.
- **Data collection upfront creates barriers.** Numerous participants mentioned that they were asked for too much information by advisors on the phone before they could access information, *"talking your whole life story, at the end you get a pittance of information"*. Facilitators Notes.

Box 1 continued:

- **People need additional support to put to use information offered.** Many struggled to find and understand the usefulness of information shared.
- **Consider support to owner occupiers on damp and mould issues.** A number of owner occupiers looking for information on damp and mould felt there was no support for them, only for renters.
- **Face-to-face support builds trust and confidence.** One person went to access support face-to-face with concerns about bills, unemployment, spiralling costs. Advisors helped him set up a payment plan with his energy company, which felt like a major weight off. This participant commented that body language and rapport built at the session gave him confidence to deal with the issue. He also commented that “once the Citizens Advice advisors got involved the problem was halved and made it a lot more manageable... they worked as a solicitor for you, as a professional body they were great.” - Facilitators Notes.
- **Offering translation services is highly valuable.** Two participants were less confident in spoken English. One was offered a translator and the other was not. It made a big difference to the participant who was offered support. The one that was not offered translation said yes to many things but did not really understand the advisor.

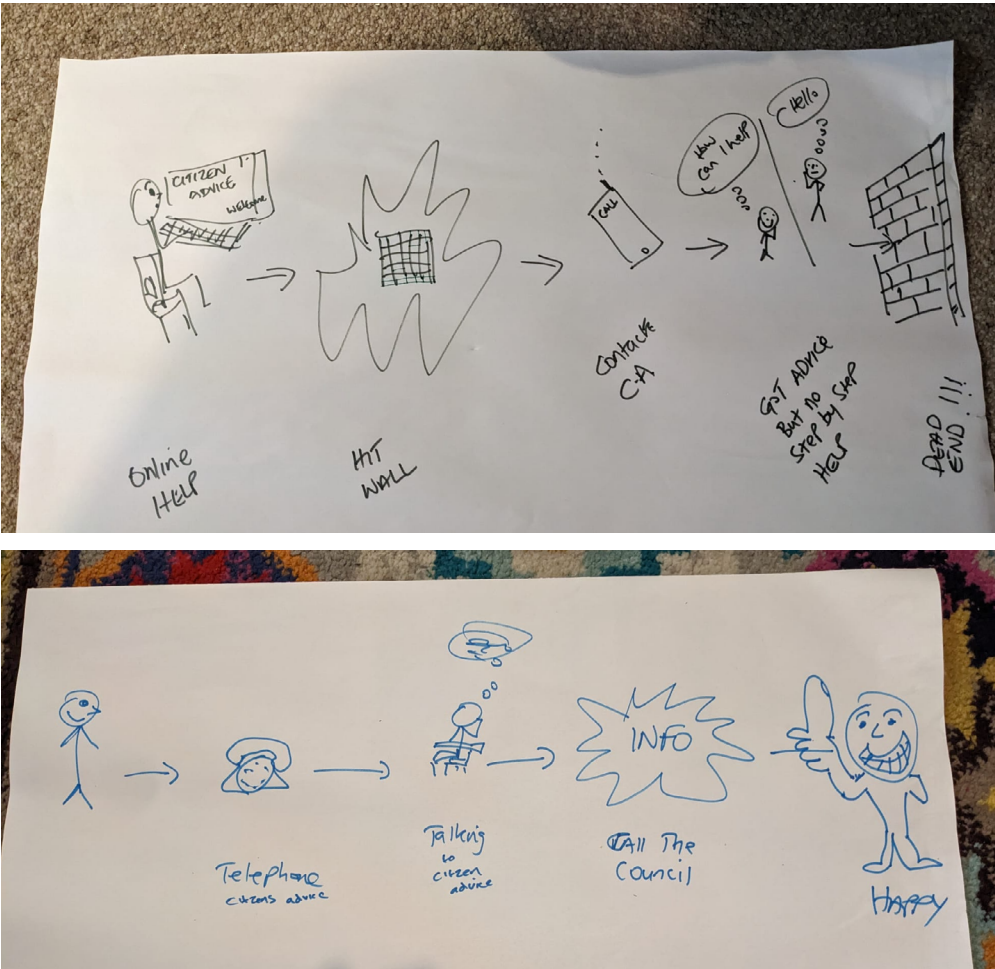


Fig. 8: Pictures above are a selection of drawings made by participants showing their experience of accessing CA services. See more in the Appendices.

Visioning an ideal Westwood Energy Advice Service

Within the focus groups, participants explored the attributes of energy advice services collectively and as individuals.

Participants ranked different aspects of a support service from most-to-least important, as individuals, and then were asked to re-consider this question in small groups using their knowledge of the community's needs (see Fig 9, right and Fig 10, next page).

The difference between considering the question individually and when thinking about it from the community's perspective reflects that the participants in the group were not the most vulnerable people in the community.

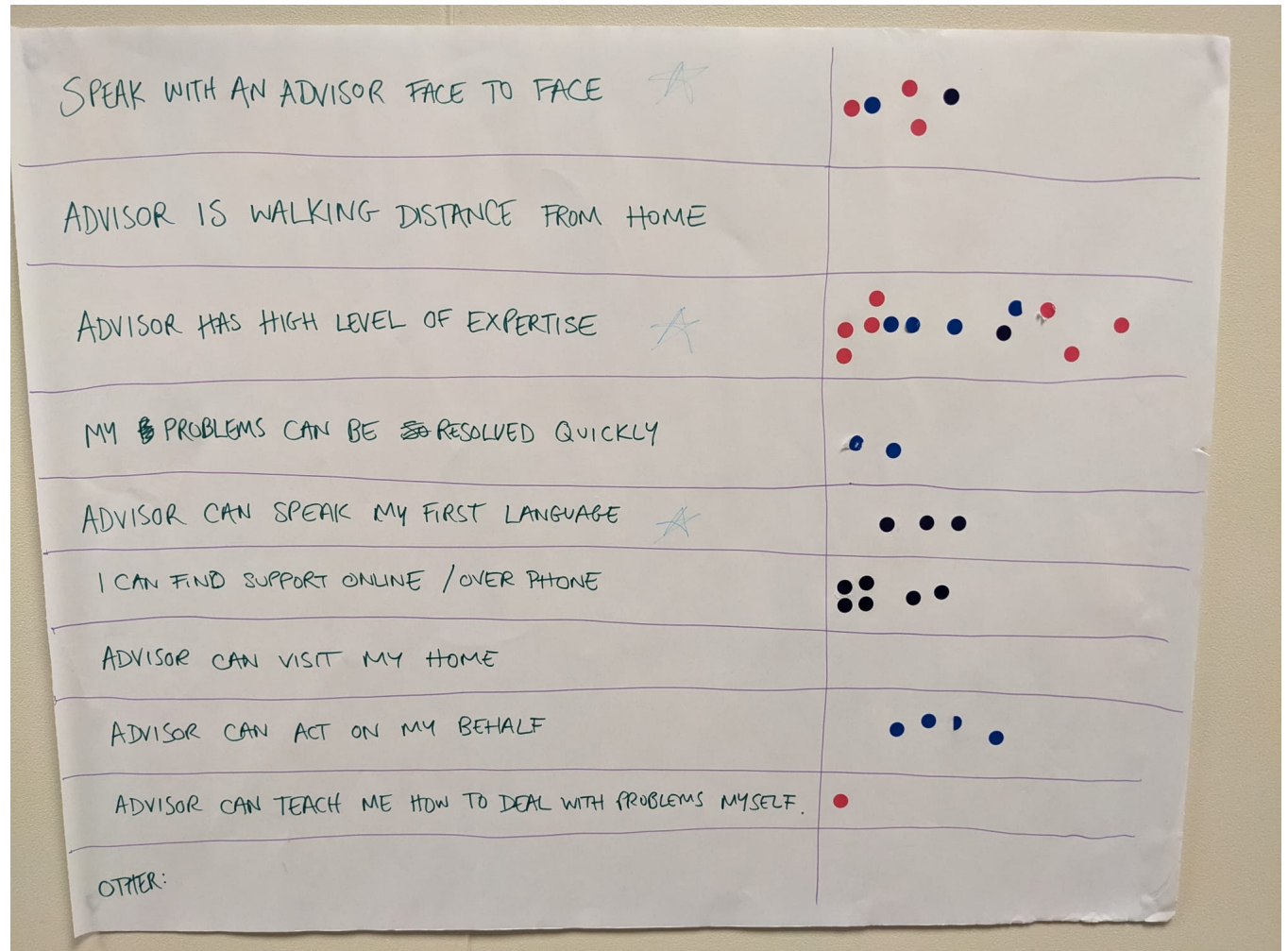


Fig. 9: Shows an exercise in which participants ranked which support features they felt, as individuals, were most important.

When thinking about those most in need, home visits, face-to-face, and advisors being walking distance from home became more important, and online/phone accessibility became less important.

In both exercises (individual ranking and collective ranking) and in both groups the advisor having a **high level of expertise**, and **speaking my first language** were identified as the most important factors.

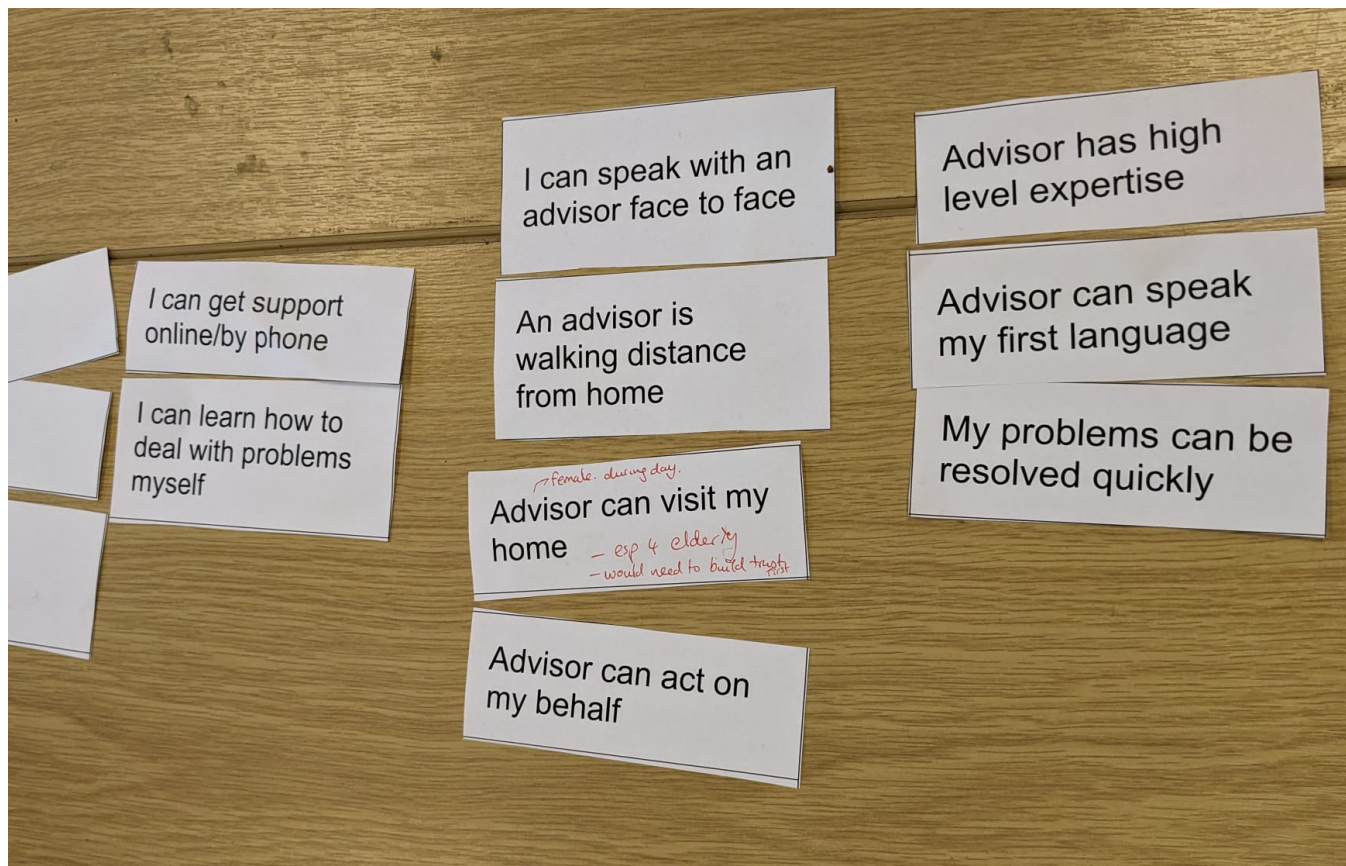


Fig. 10: The picture above shows a group exercise in which support features were ranked collectively, considering their communities needs. The most important features are on the right, and least important on the left.

‘Alongside’ support

Advisors being alongside community members came up as an important factor of good energy support services for Westwood. When discussing the components of good energy advice services one participant said:

“At Citizens Advice they will tell you what to do, here [Millenium Centre] they will do it for you.” - Facilitators Notes

When probed further, it was amended to people within the Millenium Centre would be alongside you.

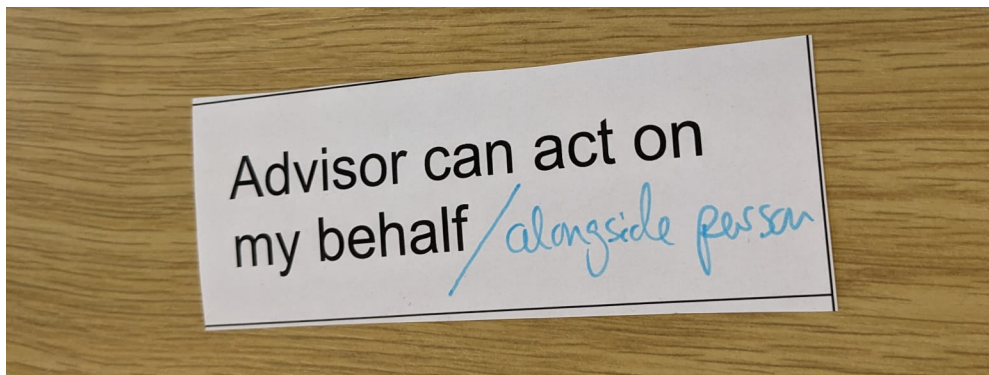


Fig. 11: This picture shows participants correcting the support feature to be more accurate to their meaning.

This aspect of ‘alongside support’ is a very important factor and would be key to developing a Westwood specific service. Newly arrived European Bangladeshis are less familiar (and possibly less confident) in navigating support processes in the UK.

This group needs additional support to make phone calls to energy suppliers or to the council rather than having to find the number and call themselves, for example. It was felt that this kind of ‘extra mile’ support needs are better understood within the community and in the Westwood Hub, than from outside agencies such as at Citizens Advice.

Both of the staff members at the Westwood Hub spoke about how they support people to get help on issues they face. Often they are asked to make calls to energy companies and other organisations on the behalf of community members. As one staff member explains:

“A lot of people don’t have the capacity to call up and actually talk to customer services and get their problems resolved.”

This can cause a lot of pressure on the staff at the centre because while they see the need and they are in a position to help, it remains challenging as this work is done informally and without being properly resourced.

Stakeholder views on the components of a best practice service in Westwood

A stakeholder workshop was hosted, and findings from the interviews and focus groups presented. Stakeholders participating included: Citizens Advice Stockport, Oldham, Rochdale, Trafford (SORT), Citizens Advice Manchester, ENWL, Carbon Co-op and a University College London researcher.

From this workshop the following components of a best practice service were identified by the group:

- Face-to-face access
- Translation services
- Appropriate level of data collection
- Expert knowledge
- Private Rental Sector (PRS) approach - including consideration of informal PRS
- An approach for working with underserved communities
- Proactive and culturally sensitive approaches
- Build trust and relationships
- Community information sessions
- Clear communication on support available

- Collaborative working to leverage trust
- Provide 'alongside' support

Focus Group Recommendations

At the close of the two focus group sessions, participants discussed and agreed the following recommendations for both Citizens Advice and the Westwood Hub:

Recommendations for Citizens Advice

Personal information: Only ask for personal information if providing in-depth support. If someone calls to ask for a general enquiry give information without taking lots of details.

- **WhatsApp:** Give updates on when to expect more information. It impacts morale to make a request and not hear anything back.
- **Follow up:** Be more timely in returning emails with more information. Otherwise people do not know whether to wait or call again.
- **Link with Millenium Centre:** Could a Citizens Advice employee work in the Millenium Centre to give advice?
- **Tenure:** Give more support to owner occupiers on damp and mould.
- **Interpreters:** Always offer, they make a big difference
- **Tailored support:** For the local community with trained advisors who understand local issues.

- **Point of contact:** Try and keep same person advising you
- **Direct referral/transfer** rather than telling people to find a service themselves

Recommendations for the Westwood Hub

- **Provide holistic support,** not just energy. Bangladeshi people from Europe need a lot of support navigating systems in the UK.
- **Interpreters:** If staff do not share a language with those coming in there should be interpreters.
- **Different departments that specialise:** people can often feel like they are being bounced between different departments. So whilst having general people who can help you is good, having specialised people, in say debt management or in heating/boilers etc, would be helpful, so there is specialist knowledge available, not just general referrals.
- Know how to **refer** to the right places
- Always have **refreshments** (hot drinks)
- **Inclusive advertising** to help people know the service is for everyone
- **Point of contact:** Try and keep the same person advising you

In designing a Westwood specific energy advice service, partners should revisit these recommendations.



Roles for Westwood Hub and Citizens Advice

During the stakeholder workshop with local Citizens Advice services, ENWL and Carbon Co-op, it became clear that there is interest in collaboration across the organisations due to the complementary strengths and weaknesses between organisations.

These complementary strengths and weaknesses are explored in Fig 12 (right).

Citizens Advice was identified as being well established, and resourced. Although it is also clear these resources are constrained due to current funding issues. CA SORT offer local face-to-face services and provide an expertise on issues such as energy debt and billing, as well as providing a more rounded service for the multiple issues people experience. However this organisation relies on citizens being proactive and searching out their services.

Conversely, the Westwood Hub has decades of experience helping people in Westwood in accessing local services as well as providing sports and educational facilities. They are trusted and also come from and understand the community.

They are skilled in the proactive and sensitive approach that is crucial to meeting the needs of the community. As a staff member from the Hub details below, they understand their value in being the first step of contact for many people in the community and the importance of collaboration:

"We're the first step that people come to for advice and support. If they need expertise or specialist help... we refer them on rather than taking on that burden ourselves because we're only a very small community organisation... We know our limits and we try not to step on anyone else's toes. So we complement people with their work rather than duplicating the work..."

"Given the current times that we're living in, it is very important to not duplicate work because of financial pressures. As an organisation we don't want to do something that someone else is doing successfully. Rather, we're happy to refer them on or work in partnership."

It became clear in the stakeholder workshop that Carbon Co-op and its expertise in leading participatory workshops around energy issues would be a crucial third partner in a local service. Tackling issues, particularly damp and mould needs an approach that includes working with the community to enable peer education and behaviour change.

This research project has led to the four organisations (CA SORT, CA MCR, the Westwood Hub and Carbon Co-op) developing a collaboration project for which we will be seeking funding for later in 2024.

	Westwood Hub	Citizens Advice local branches	Carbon Co-op
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proactive and sensitive community outreach. • Strong community networks - easy to spread information through word of mouth. • Centrally located venue with high daily footfall through 'non energy related' activities. • Trusted by the local community. • Enthusiasm to build knowledge around energy issues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well established advice service. • Delivers face-to-face, phone, online and whatsapp support on energy issues locally. • Has a rounded support offer (i.e. housing, benefits, immigration etc.) • Has translation services. • Trusted to give quality advice. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well established local organisation. • Technical expertise in retrofit and energy systems topics. • Trusted by the Westwood Hub. • Over a decade of experience of delivering peer education workshops on energy issues. • Good at fundraising for innovative and pioneering projects. • Stakeholder facilitation
Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very little experience delivering energy advice. • Challenges around developing and maintaining expertise around energy issues. • Under-resourced. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource and capacity issues in providing additional face-to-face services. • Operating on reduced resources. • Not set up to deliver proactive and sensitive community advice services. • Does not offer peer learning opportunities. • Provides more basic energy advice and signposting. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited capacity to run an energy advice service. • Not known by local community members. • No experience delivering advice on energy bills and energy debt. • Little experience of directly supporting people in fuel poverty.

Fig. 12: Strengths and weaknesses of three collaborating organisations in reference to delivering energy advice in Westwood.

5. Conclusion

Westwood, like many other communities across the UK, face significant economic, housing and social inequalities. People in these communities are at risk of significant health and wellbeing impacts from the energy crisis and in particular from living in cold, damp and mouldy housing conditions. To meet the needs of these communities a culturally sensitive and proactive approach is essential.

It is clear from the demographics of the area, focus group sessions and interviews, that people in Westwood struggle to pay their bills, and do not know how to manage the resulting damp and mould issues. These issues are not currently being addressed by existing support structures within Westwood.

Citizens Advice and Warm Homes Oldham (Oldham Council energy service) do not have the resources to outreach into the community on these issues. Conversely, due to the relative newness of the energy crisis, and potentially, the mistrust of mainstream advice services, community members do not know that support is available and what this entails.

The issue of damp and mould in homes, whilst being one caused by underheating and poor ventilation, also has many behavioural aspects which could be addressed through peer education and community workshops. Local estate agents may also be well placed to contribute to this work.

The issue of energy bills and managing debt is something that Citizens Advice is well placed to address. However there is a strong sense of futility in relation to energy bills, which may be real in terms of recognising the limits of existing support. However, to ensure that any support that is available does get to those in need, more needs to be done to communicate what is on offer. There are opportunities to do this through utilising the strong word of mouth communications networks connected to the Westwood Hub.

The existing support available through mainstream avenues is reactive as opposed to proactive. Cultural issues, in particular the attitude of 'suffering in silence' means that proactive and sensitive support is more likely to be fruitful in this community, and others like it.

Advice services relying on service users to contact them or find information online means those most at risk will not access support that could be vital.

"...we really need to get to grips with the mould and the damp issue because it is a life-threatening issue."

Staff Member, Westwood Hub

A positive outcome of this research is development of a connection between the Westwood Hub, Carbon Co-op and Citizens Advice SORT and MCR. We are exploring the potential of collaboration between these organisations and seeking new ways of connecting and building locally rooted and effective energy advice services.

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