

Housing Renovation & Health: Listening to Lived Experience



Background

One in three households in the UK cannot afford their energy bills or the cost of making their homes more energy efficient. Various government schemes aim to address this. As part of the new Warm Homes Plan, eligible households can receive measures such as improved insulation and low-carbon heating systems. These upgrades are expected to reduce energy bills for residents while also helping to lower UK greenhouse gas emissions.

We want to find out whether these upgrades also affect people's health. To do this, we will anonymously link data on home energy efficiency upgrades with healthcare records. We are also interested in people's lived experiences in this transition. To get

us started, we held two workshops in London. The first was for people struggling with energy bills, and the second was for people with experience of energy efficiency upgrades. This is what we learned from the second workshop.

Workshop

Seven residents attended the workshop in Camden, London. We discussed what the changes meant for health and how easy it was to access help and support.

As in the first workshop, mental health emerged as a major theme whenever housing issues were discussed. Many participants described a continuum ranging from everyday worries to long-term chronic stress associated with housing problems.

“A home should support people's wellbeing and everyday living. Accessible, dependable support can be particularly important when someone already relies on others for help”

Megan Leach, Patient and Public Involvement partner

Children often bear the consequences of poor-quality housing, for example by feeling unable to invite friends over or by experiencing poor health. Older people, who typically spend more time at home, often suffer in silence when cold conditions make everyday activities painful. [Cold, damp, and mouldy homes can trigger breathing difficulties](#) in both groups. Tragically, many elderly die during cold winters. This summer's heatwaves also reminded many that the [existing housing stock is unfit](#) and that change is needed.

Will government-funded renovation schemes make a difference?

We heard a few success stories, including about elderly relatives who could now afford to keep their homes warm. Unfortunately, other experiences were less positive. Some renovations were described as minor, incomplete, faulty, or even fraudulent. Participants reported

problems ranging from 'hissing' windows and ants nesting in insulation materials to contractors charging for work that was never completed. A common perception among people renting privately or owning their own home was that there would be upfront costs. They were unaware of government schemes where this is not the case. Some people reported hearing about a relevant scheme only to find out that it was closed.

What needs to change?

Good-quality, dignified housing should be a government priority. At present, there are too many barriers. Information is often difficult to find, and many people do not trust that they can access unbiased advice or that accepting support will not leave them vulnerable in the longer term.

There are many [successful case studies in which residents describe how government-funded energy efficiency schemes transformed their lives](#). However, our workshop



revealed a much more mixed picture. As in the first workshop, participants felt there was a need for a trusted one-stop shop that can connect people with the right schemes as well as stronger

enforcement of quality standards. Change happens at the pace of trust. We can only hope that the [Warm Homes Plan](#) will help rebuild that trust.

"In the retrofit programmes, information is difficult to understand; the eligibility criteria are not always thoroughly explained at the outset. There may also be tight deadlines to apply by and for those who have poor literacy or language barriers, they fall through the gaps"

Samina Begum, Patient and Public Involvement partner

Final words

The workshops with members of the public have highlighted that:

- a) People needing the support most also deal with many other problems besides being able to heat their homes
- b) The schemes are not that well known or understood.

There are, in other words, both wider structural barriers related to low income that should be addressed as well as barriers in terms of information and overcoming distrust.

The idea with the workshops is to listen and reflect on how the schemes can be improved to deliver better health outcomes in the longer term. At this early stage

of the project, they are important puzzle pieces rather than the final dossier. We are continuing this discussion within the team, which has four public partners, and we will organise further workshops to reflect on the research findings later.

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[CoSine – Co-benefits in health from Sustainable Housing \(LSHTM\)](#)