

Focus Article

"I have a panic attack when I pick up the phone": experiences of energy advice amongst 'hard to reach' energy users

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Introduction

In this paper we provide a short briefing on recently completed qualitative research into experiences of energy advice amongst so-called hard to reach energy users. Our sample of 26 respondents comprised of highly vulnerable and marginalised consumers, many of whom led chaotic lives but who agreed to share their experiences of seeking help with energy problems (e.g. affordability; cold homes; ineffective heating etc.) with the research team through qualitative interviews. The research revealed poor treatment that failed to resolve their predicaments and exacerbated physical and mental health conditions. Surprising findings also emerged regarding who participants turn to, in the first instance, for help with energy problems.

Background: energy as an essential service for all

Energy supply and warm, 'affordable to heat and power' housing are essential services in today's society. The Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey, for example, asks a representative sample of people to rank which necessities they consider essential for life in today's society (Gordon et al, 2013). Access to warm, dry housing is consistently ranked as one of the highest priority necessities. Similarly, the original establishment of a sector specific regulator for energy supply reflected this recognition of energy as an essential service. In recognition of this the energy sector regulator has placed a responsibility on suppliers of energy services - in effect energy suppliers, housing providers and energy efficiency services - to make sure that all sections of the community have equitable access to such services. It also requires proactive efforts to identify the specific needs of different groups and to make sure such groups are not overlooked or 'left behind' (Roberts, 2018).

The research is important and timely because it is widely accepted that, despite the duties placed on providers of energy services, energy initiatives designed to improve access to warm, affordable to heat housing for all often fail to reach those who need them the most (Citizens Advice, 2019; NEA, 2019; Snell et al, 2018). Whilst we clearly need to do better in terms of reaching and supporting hard to reach individuals and households to improve their energy circumstances, such groups are inherently poorly understood and it can be hard to know how to go about this. Every contact represents an opportunity to learn more about and better support a hard to reach customer or service user but, as our research reveals, these opportunities are often squandered.

This project engaged with hard to reach individuals who have all experienced energy related problems. Some participants had sought help with the difficulties they were experiencing and some had not. We explored their motivations for seeking help (or not), their experiences and perceptions of the help received and the outcomes that ensued. The research aimed not only to shine light on the energy advice experiences of rarely heard voices but also to use these insights to help energy advice providers to improve the frequency, quality and positive impact of engagement with hard to reach customers. The lessons identified will also resonate beyond the energy and advice sectors and will raise important considerations for all sectors aiming to improve their engagement with their hardest to reach customers or service users.

In this paper we discuss what is meant by 'hard to reach' in an energy context; share some of the key insights from the research and conclude by discussions some of the policy implications to emerge.

Who are the 'hard to reach'?

The terms 'hard to reach' and 'hard to hear' are widely used by health and social care service providers, by national and local governments wanting to make sure everybody has a say in consultations or by any organisation providing a service intended for the general public. However, there is a distinct lack of clarity about the meaning of these terms (Freimuth and Mettger, 1990). They are often used inconsistently to describe any form of minority group, such as homeless people, drug users, disabled people, recent migrants, private renters or even young or old people in general (Cardiff Council, 2009).

Many commentators argue that using an umbrella term such as 'hard to reach' implies a homogeneity within groups that does not exist (Brackertz and Meredyth, 2008). It also implies there is something about such people that makes their engagement with services difficult, rather than service providers failing to make sure their services are inclusive. Others argue that the term 'hard to reach' is context specific and there is no single list that can define groups of people that are 'hard to reach'. An alternative term sometimes used in care and social services is 'seldom heard' (IRISS, 2011). Factors that contribute to people being seldom heard in care include disability, ethnicity, sexuality, communication impairments, mental ill-health, homelessness and geographic isolation (ibid).

While the 'context specific' nature of engaging 'hard to reach' households suggests there are numerous and wide ranging barriers to engagement, it is possible to identify certain overarching barriers that can be applied to almost all groups (Cardiff Council, 2009). These include: methods of involvement; physical barriers and attitudinal barriers.

Remaining cognisant of the variety of factors that can render an individual hard to reach and how imposing a definition may preclude the identification of unanticipated

speak to). The latter have been advocated as an effective means of recruiting hard to reach groups in health research (Sadler et al, 2010). The most fruitful approach involved working through organisations (with which we had established relationships) providing essential services that people in desperate circumstances will often need to engage with to enable survival. They included food banks, homeless shelters and projects which prepare the formerly homeless and prison leavers for the transition to their own accommodation. Individuals recruited through these routes made up two thirds of the sample.

Key findings

Respondents were asked to describe any energy related issues they were experiencing or had experienced in the past. All of those we spoke to were experiencing significant energy related difficulties despite not having been recruited specifically on this basis. The majority of these problems related to concerns about the affordability of energy and homes that were cold and difficult to heat. Often participants were experiencing several issues in tandem reporting problems with cold homes, energy debt, under-heating and struggling to understand bills, tariffs and meter readings as well as a lack of confidence or capacity to seek help. It was clear in many cases that the affordability problems reported reflected wider difficulties associated with a low income. Many participants identified energy problems that were linked to their landlord (whether private or social). Primarily being a tenant caused problems when it came to trying to resolve energy problems but in some cases, private landlords were identified by respondents as causing or frustrating their energy problems.

Experiences of seeking help and support

Despite the many barriers they faced, 17 of the 26 respondents had sought help with the energy problems they were experiencing. Whilst it might be expected that neutral and more trusted independent advice providers (such as Citizens Advice, for example) would be the first port of call when facing an energy related crisis, the finding confounded expectations revealing that 12 respondents had turned to their energy supplier and just five to independent advice providers. Most of those seeking help had approached their energy supplier in response to a communication they had received or because they perceived that it was the only way to resolve their problem. All of those who had sought advice through independent providers reported positive experiences but in line with the findings of the Commission for Customers in Vulnerable Circumstances (CCVC) (2019), most of those who had approached their energy supplier reported poor treatment and said they did not trust their energy supplier. It was widely commented that energy suppliers showed no sensitivity to individual circumstances and preferences when dealing with their customers and overwhelmed them with information and questions.

I don't like the lack of connection, you just feel as if everything is being done by robots. I think what is really unfair is the way that communications are working with everybody is all geared to the young and new technology I think they should keep the options open so that it's not just a digital world... I think it's being pushed at the expense of people who can't access it easily and I think that is really bad. They are anonymous, they are not real. (Valerie, 83, in the early stages of dementia)

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There was also evidence of 'negative feedback loops' in relation to exchanges between participants and energy suppliers. Participants reported that they would often enter into the conversation in an anxious state because they anticipated problems and/or because making the call pushed the limits of their confidence. This anxiety would then lead to heated exchanges or be interpreted by the person taking the call as hostility and the call was likely to be terminated.

I have a panic attack when I pick up the phone to talk to them. Half the time, when you're getting het up you are trying to explain to them something and they are not understanding for one reason or another and then you get mad because of it and they put down the phone. (Sophie, 41, former rough sleeper)

What would make it easier to access energy advice and support?

Of the 26 respondents, 23 would prefer face to face advice. Over half of those calling for face to face advice felt that shops or other premises in accessible locations would be the best option with the rest suggesting that home visits would be more effective.

Face to face advice was felt to improve the chance of being heard and understood. Complex situations can be explained more easily in this context because it is easier to share documents and to bring someone along for support.

It's better that way because you know you're going to get somewhere. They can say what they want over the phone but face to face is better because then you know it's coming from the mouth and not coming from over a phone, you can actually see the person's language, you can actually see if they are being honest and truthful in what they say and do. It's not easy to do it over the phone; it's like disbelief when it's over phone...you can't see what body language it is. (Caroline, 41, disabled, living in social housing)

Those who advocated home visits felt that they would enable advice providers to reach a greater breadth of people as they remove any issues around mobility or travel; reduce anxiety as they are in a familiar setting and enable the occupant to convey the problem more easily. A small number of respondents felt that over the phone advice would be acceptable with some modifications to the current system including the eradication of push-button menus; free phone numbers and fewer transfers of callers between departments. It was also important to participants that they were not hurried and there was also a call for the use of simple, uncomplicated language.

Despite trust in energy companies being universally low, the majority of participants who had sought help with their energy problems had turned to their energy suppliers. Many participants found it difficult to navigate the energy advice landscape and several participants stated that their own family was their most trusted source of support.

Conclusions and policy considerations

The research outlined yielded detailed first hand insights into experiences of seeking help with energy related problems amongst hard to reach and vulnerable individuals. Thus it helped to address a significant gap in our understanding of how hard to reach individuals experience energy advice and what might increase engagement, improve experiences and maximise the impact of encounters where they do take place. Although the kinds of energy related problems that might affect hard to reach and

vulnerable groups are fairly well documented, this study has broken new ground in generating detailed insights into how such groups seek and experience energy advice.

The testimonies gathered provide a clear indication that despite widespread mistrust of energy suppliers, they were often the first port of call when seeking to resolve an energy related problem. It was usually an affordability issue that motivated this contact and the outcomes for the consumers in question were usually unsatisfactory. Participants were very clear about where these encounters were falling short, citing disrespectful treatment that did not take account of their particular needs and circumstances. Many reported feeling exhausted and even unwell after recounting their situation repeatedly as they were transferred between departments and left frustrated over unkept promises to call them back.

Participants were also clear about how these problems might be remedied seeing face to face engagement as critical in terms of reaching more people and offering a better quality of service. They stated they would like the opportunity to be properly heard and understood rather than being 'fobbed off' or side tracked by other issues not directly relevant to their predicament. Unfortunately, energy suppliers appear to be moving in the opposite direction to their preferences in terms of their preferred communication method, increasingly seeking to divert customers to websites.

Participants said they had a greater level of trust in independent advice organisations. Such organisations may offer greater scope for face to face engagement but they were not generally the organisations that participants turned to in the first instance. Therefore, more consideration needs to be given to how vulnerable consumers can be guided towards advice providers which are better attuned to their needs and preferences for engagement. However, we do not wish to suggest that energy suppliers should be absolved of responsibility for better meeting the needs of vulnerable customers. They too must carefully consider how they might genuinely improve in terms of their strategy for reaching and delivering a high quality service to all customers.

The direct involvement of hard to reach groups in this research and all the benefits and insights that have stemmed from that raises more fundamental questions about developing advice and support services with, rather than for, hard to reach groups. There is an extensive body of literature from the field of social exclusion that suggests that co-design of services results in effective and sustainable projects and more successful remedies for exclusion (Milbourne, 2002). Yet, in practice, there is no ready acceptance of the value of doing so. It is clear that unless such groups can find a place where their voice and their priorities are heard and accepted, then advice and support services (and not just those allied to energy) will continue to fail to meet their needs.

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