



## Climate Outreach & Information Network (COIN)

*“Communicating, connecting and catalysing action on climate change”*

### Communicating with Oxford social housing tenants about energy-saving: Summary findings from a citizen consultation

#### Background & aims of consultation

COIN is an Oxford-based independent charity, with 10 years of engaging the public around climate change and energy-related issues. We were commissioned by Oxford City Council to carry out a process of consultation with social housing tenants in Oxford. The aim of the consultation was to:

- Explore how a group of tenants from Oxford used energy and how they felt about household energy-saving measures
- Understand how ‘fuel poverty’ may be affecting some social housing tenants
- Identify what could be done to support them, and how Oxford City Council can help tenants to better help themselves to save energy
- Produce an easily-accessible summary of the key findings from the consultation, and a set of recommendations for more effectively engaging social housing tenants around energy saving

Households in fuel poverty are unable to afford to keep the house warmed to an adequate level. More than two million in England alone experience some form of fuel poverty, and the problem is getting worse.<sup>1</sup> Energy-saving measures (including structural alterations to properties such as fitting cavity wall insulation or solar panels, behavioural changes such as better heating management, and the addition of items such as draught-excluders) are proven methods of reducing energy use.

---

<sup>1</sup>Department of Energy and Climate Change. 2014. Annual fuel poverty statistics report, 2014. [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/319280/Fuel\\_Poverty\\_Report\\_Final.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/319280/Fuel_Poverty_Report_Final.pdf); Association for the Conservation of Energy. 2014. Fuel poverty: 2014 update. <http://www.energybillrevolution.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/ACE-and-EBR-fact-file-2014-01-Fuel-Poverty-update-2014.pdf>

Lower energy use is beneficial for at least two reasons: the lower environmental impact of burning less coal, oil, and gas, and more affordable bills.

However, despite several decades of research on how to encourage and promote household energy-saving behaviours, only limited progress has been made<sup>2</sup> (Capstick et al, 2015). For social housing tenants (as with private renters), the situation is made more complex by the fact that they do not own their property. Social housing tenants are also likely to have lower than average levels of income, and so the cost of some of the measures that they could take themselves (e.g. fitting draught excluders) can be offputting.<sup>3</sup>

Some social housing tenants have very low incomes, and are therefore some of the most vulnerable people in society in terms of experiencing fuel poverty. Others are elderly (and so require their homes to be warmer than average), or do not have English as a first language. All of these factors – often in combination – can make providing support for tenants struggling with high energy bills a significant challenge for city councils.

### **The consultation process**

During May 2015, COIN hosted one focus group with five Oxford City Council tenants and two semi-structured individual interviews, also with tenants. The focus group and the interviews were held at Oxford City Hall. The focus group lasted two hours, and broadly followed COIN's 'Narrative Workshop' format, whereby participants first discuss their general views and reflect briefly on their values and identity, before discussing the issue at hand (in this case, energy saving), and finishing with an evaluation of several different 'narratives' (in this case, four short narratives about the reasons for energy saving). This approach provides insights into the participants themselves, their views on energy saving, and the sorts of language

---

<sup>2</sup> Capstick, S. B., Lorenzoni, I., Corner, A. and Whitmarsh, L. E. (2015). Prospects for radical emissions reduction through behavior and lifestyle change. Carbon Management (10.1080/17583004.2015.1020011).

<sup>3</sup> Preston, I., White, V., Blacklaws, K. and Hirsh, D. 2014. Fuel and poverty: a rapid evidence assessment for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Centre for Sustainable Energy. [http://www.cse.org.uk/downloads/reports-and-publications/fuel-poverty/Fuel\\_and\\_poverty\\_review\\_June2014.pdf](http://www.cse.org.uk/downloads/reports-and-publications/fuel-poverty/Fuel_and_poverty_review_June2014.pdf)

that might be useful for engaging them more effectively on energy-saving. The interviews followed a similar, but condensed, format. The four narratives tested in this consultation were:

**A (saving money vs saving the environment)**

*“The reason I try to save energy is because it saves me money. I’m not really bothered about whether its good for the environment or not, but my bills keep going up so I’m really careful with the heating. If it wasn’t so expensive I’d turn the heating up.”*

**B (comfort & health)**

*“The most important thing for me is having a home that’s cosy and comfortable for me and my family. You can’t live in a cold house its bad for your health, but I’d be happy to turn the heating down more if the house was better insulated”*

**C (unfairness)**

*“The amount I pay on energy each month isn’t fair, it’s a big drain on my income. But why should I have to make changes to the way I live and use energy at home? It’s not my fault that energy prices are so expensive”*

**D (control over energy)**

*“I’d like to save more energy but I just forget to turn things off, it’s the habit of a lifetime! I have a pre-paid meter and I like the way it lets you control how much you use, you can tell quickly if you use too much. I’d be interested in trying a ‘smart meter’, but I’d like to know more about them first”*

It is important to note that this was a limited consultation, due to the difficulties encountered by Oxford City Council in recruiting tenants to take part in the consultation process, and the sample size is not large enough to draw firm conclusions about the wider perspectives of tenants in the Oxford area, or nationally. In addition, of the seven people we spoke to, four had some kind of specialist interest in energy supply or energy savings, and so they are unlikely to be representative of tenants in general. Despite this, some valuable insights were gained, which we summarise below.

## Tenants' views on energy use, energy saving and staying warm

- Worries about the cost of electricity and gas were widespread, linked to both the cost of energy and participants' level of income. One participant mentioned that her energy costs were about one third of her total expenditure, commenting "*I know some people spend as much on dinner in one night as I do on energy in a month*".
- Tenants living in large blocks were aware that large infrastructural change is needed to use energy more efficiently, but frustrated that they were not personally in a position to make that happen (for example, one participant mentioned she has to pile clothes up against the windows in the winter because they are so draughty, but has been told she will have to wait two years for the windows to be replaced).
- Tenants on limited income often can't afford the initial outlay in paying for home improvements that would increase the efficiency of their energy use - or they perceive them as too expensive.
- Several participants had moved onto prepaid electricity meters in order to be more aware of their energy use, so they don't get into debt. Prepaid tariffs are more expensive however, so those tenants are likely to be losing money overall.
- Several tenants have storage heaters and the 'Economy 7' heating system fitted. These are timed to come on in the day and the middle of the night, but not in the evening or the morning when they are needed. One participant commented "*I have the heating on during the night time - what for? - and during the day it's cold...How is it possible to save money on this system?*" Storage heaters are also fuelled by electricity - the most expensive and carbon-intensive way of heating homes.<sup>4</sup>
- Although most tenants did not express concern about poor health due to poorly insulated homes, one individual referred to the health implications of high levels of condensation on poorly-insulated windows. When prompted with the health-based narrative in the final section of the discussion, several

---

<sup>4</sup> See for example Energy Savings Trust website  
<http://www.energysavingtrust.org.uk/domestic/content/electric-heating-systems>

tenants recalled elderly individuals in social housing who they were aware of who had suffered health complications from insufficiently heated houses.

**Principles of effective communication with tenants:**

- **Everyone should do their bit.** The tenants we spoke to told us that they were prepared to do more to save energy, but only if the council, the government and energy companies were also playing their part. One tenant expressed a popular view (distrust of energy companies) when they said *“I would...[turn the heating up if I could afford it]...but simply because I think these energy companies are making money for people out of their back pocket”*. This suggests the perceived unfairness of low-income individuals having to make changes to their own behaviour while others don't play their part could be a barrier to engaging tenants more effectively. Tenants felt the council needs to be clear about the big changes they're making to people's homes (like insulating council properties, replacing windows and even installing solar panels). That way, tenants can see that everyone is doing their bit.
- **Making personal contact with tenants:** At several points during the focus group session, participants referred to knowledge or advice gained through personal experience (e.g., the experience of a brother, a conversation with an electrician, observations from visits to other countries). Making individual contact with tenants is likely to be more effective than supplying them with written materials.
- **Don't assume that 'one size fits all':** Energy use is highly individual, and tenants in different circumstances may struggle to conserve energy for very different reasons. For example, one tenant may find it hard because they have children who used a lot of electricity; another because they were worried about the health implications of energy savings devices; another because they weren't aware of the possibilities. A successful strategy will need to understand the complexity of people's responses.
- **Empower tenants to monitor their own energy use:** Tenants using pre-paid electricity meters seemed generally satisfied with the opportunity they

gave them to monitor their usage on a day to day basis - despite the fact they tend to make electricity bills more expensive overall. One participant had resisted pressure from energy companies to switch to direct debit payments for his fuel bills, in order to remain aware of how much he was paying. The ability to monitor energy use on a day to day basis was an important principle overall.

- **Accept and acknowledge that change may make tenants feel unsafe:** One participant expressed concern that disposing of energy saving lightbulbs is a health risk. Any successful strategy will need to understand and respond to these kinds of concerns.
- **Don't assume that environmental concerns are irrelevant:** Recent research suggests environment and health-based information strategies can motivate greater energy savings than providing information about the financial benefits of saving energy.<sup>5</sup> Three out of seven participants pro-actively mentioned protecting the environment as an important issue - although none used the phrase 'climate change'. Most participants did not agree with the narrative stating 'I don't care about the environment', with one tenant saying *"It says here: I am not really bothered whether it's good for the environment or not [in response to a quote prompt]. No. I care about that. So no I don't agree about this"* and another stating *"Using energy, of course it is using the resources of the country, whether it is oil, water, whatever, and the effect of the fumes going out on long day of using this...they have got the effect on the environment, CO2"*.
- **Spell it out:** The tenants we spoke to told us that they don't just want information on how to save energy in the home - but information about what to buy from the hardware store, where the shop is, and how much it would cost.
- Ideally, tenants would like financial support for installing energy saving measures.

### **Modes of communication:**

---

<sup>5</sup> Asensio, O. and Delmas, M. 2015. Nonprice incentives and energy conservation. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. 112 (6) E510-E515 <http://www.pnas.org/content/112/6/E510.full>;  
Evans, L., Maio, G., Corner, A., Hodgetts, C., Ahmed, S., Hahn, U. 2013. Self-interest and pro-environmental behaviour. Nature Climate Change 3, 122-125

- Tenants were fairly positive about the idea of the council distributing tips on how to save energy in leaflets, or information packs given out when new tenants take on a property. Only one participant seemed aware that the council was already doing this, however.
- Where provided, information packs should contain not just the 'what' but the 'where' and the 'how'. E.g. not just what change is needed, but what to buy from B&Q, but where B&Q is, and how much it will cost.
- Tenants were more positive about the idea of a home visit than other forms of communication. The ideal was the council doing a home visit and then offering to pay for the changes needed.
- One tenant mentioned that contact in council offices can seem overly 'formal' and off-putting, limiting the number of tenants that are able or willing to engage. She said she would find it easier to engage *"if it was something in my local environment, out in the park, somewhere less intimidating"*.
- As described above, energy use is a highly individual process and face to face contact is a far more powerful way of communicating information and motivating behaviour change. While potentially more expensive and resource-intensive than leaflets, individual home visits and events in the local community seem likely to have a greater impact.

### **Some specific suggestion for engaging tenants more effectively**

- Giving tenants the option to inherit the infrastructure from previous occupants: one tenant vividly described the experience of entering a new property where all the infrastructure - including the curtain rails and laminate flooring - from the previous tenant had been removed. If the possibility existed to inherit this instead it would save the council resources and give new tenants more opportunities to save energy without spending money.
- The ability to monitor energy use is clearly important for those on a stretched budget. This can be difficult when pre-pay electricity meters are a more expensive way to pay for energy and companies put pressure on their customers to pay by direct debit. Specific advice on cheap prepay tariffs could help these tenants.



- Some of the tenants were in a position where some basic changes could make a significant difference to their position (e.g. applying temporary plastic insulation films to draughty windows, using a temporary heater instead of a storage heater). A home visit and some short-term help could be of particular benefit to those tenants.
- Of the seven people we spoke to, three pro-actively mentioned solar power. One participant lived in a property where solar panels had already been installed and was enthusiastic about the impact on his energy bills. Two clearly identified the council installing solar panels on their house as the action they would most like to see. Installing solar panels would likely be popular among tenants, and would represent a significant (and visible) commitment to energy-saving from the council.
- The majority of the participants had not heard of smart meters, but generally reacted positively to the idea when it was explained. One tenant commented *“My brother has got one. It scares you sometime - you turn the kettle on and see your energy use shoot right up.”* Two people we spoke to had used them, but they had both stopped doing so - one because he found constant monitoring stressful, one because she found them inconvenient and felt they had already given her enough information to understand her electricity usage better. This suggests that many tenants who are initially enthusiastic about the idea of smart meters may struggle to use them in practice. Targeting smart meters at tenants who have expressed a particular interest in monitoring their energy use, providing them on a short-term basis, and providing support to tenants who receive them, may help with their integration. However, it should not be assumed that those on low incomes will necessarily be positive towards smart meters. One piece of recent research found that people on lower incomes tended to be more suspicious of sharing data on their energy use with power companies (which would be necessary to allow the full impact of smart meters to be realised).<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Spence, A. et al (2015). Public perceptions of demand-side management and a smarter energy future. Nature Climate Change, DOI: 10.1038/NCLIMATE2610.



## Recommendations for language to use

- It was clear that affordability was a key concern among tenants. But notably, no-one used terms like ‘fuel poverty’ to refer to their own situation. Instead, people suggested that they ‘didn’t have a lot to spare’, or that energy bills comprised a significant proportion of their income. When referring to affordability, it is probably beneficial to avoid terms such as ‘fuel poverty’ or ‘fuel poor’: instead, use phrases like ‘making your money go further’ or acknowledge people’s perception that energy companies are profiting unfairly and say ‘the council can help you to deal with energy company prices by showing you how to save energy’.
- Many tenants felt that it wasn’t ‘fair’ that they should have to watch their behaviour so closely when others weren’t doing their bit. Use statements that directly link what the Council is doing around infrastructure (eg new solar panels) with what tenants can do, to build a sense of fairness and ‘exchange’.
- The tenants we spoke to acknowledged both the financial and the environmental reasons for saving energy. If highlighting the environmental benefit of energy saving, tenants language tended to focus on not over-using resources or avoiding pollution, rather than climate change or carbon emissions. So language around avoiding waste is likely to be effective (the principle of avoiding waste is something that tends to be widely supported in previous COIN research with diverse groups of the public).<sup>7</sup>
- In the focus groups, tenants were asked to discuss what characteristics they most valued in other people. Participants highlighted honesty, reliability, honesty and practicing what you preach as the most important. Language that reflects these values - for example openly acknowledging the difficulties the council faces in communicating with tenants, and emphasising the efforts the council is making to stick to its aspirations - are most likely to be successful in communications.

---

<sup>7</sup> COIN. 2014. How narrative workshops informed a national climate change campaign. <http://www.climateoutreach.org.uk/portfolio-item/how-narrative-workshops-informed-a-national-climate-change-campaign/>