



**GREEN
DOCTOR**

ENERGISING COMMUNITIES

LESSONS LEARNED THROUGH TACKLING
FUEL POVERTY IN A PANDEMIC



Executive Summary

The **Energising Communities Programme** has been supporting households at risk of fuel poverty with energy advice since March 2020. The start of the programme coincided with the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, creating new challenges and opportunities for the programme. This report looks at what we have learned through delivering this programme over the past year.

Key findings:

- + More households needing advice and support to manage their energy bills and more complex cases among the households engaging with the service.
- + Being able to deliver energy advice over the phone, rather than purely face-to-face, enhances the service we can offer.
- + The existing social infrastructure in an area, such as community hubs and other organisations, is hugely important in facilitating connections between households in need of advice and services.
- + Services like Energising Communities have the potential to help level up communities through tackling health inequalities and helping households adjust to the measures we need to take to combat climate change.



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 GROUNDWORK
CHANGING PLACES
CHANGING LIVES

Introduction

Energising Communities is an energy efficiency programme that delivers energy saving advice and support to the most vulnerable households experiencing fuel poverty.

The programme is led by Groundwork local delivery staff in Stoke-on-Trent, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire Moorlands, Barnsley, Kirklees, Sunderland, Blackpool, Rochdale, and Burnley. Groundwork's Community Energy Advisors are independent energy efficiency experts, and the programme was designed to enable them to support 2,800 households with tailored home-based advice on energy use, behaviour change, switching energy suppliers, benefits and debt support as well as fitting small energy saving measures in homes.

Alongside advice for households, the programme was designed to deliver 150 energy awareness training sessions, using a 'train the trainer' model to help support even more households and to create a legacy for years to come.

Energising Communities is funded by the Energy Industry Voluntary Redress Scheme - energyredress.org.uk

Just as the programme was getting off the ground in March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic hit the UK, leading to major changes in the ways Community Energy Advisors operated. The pandemic has had a significant impact on household incomes, leaving more people vulnerable to fuel poverty.

As a result, the programme and the work of Groundwork's Community Energy Advisors is needed now more than ever before. This report looks at Groundwork's experience of running the Energising Communities programme during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic and what can be learned for efforts to tackle fuel poverty in the future.

Groundwork's Green Doctors

The Energising Communities programme sits within Groundwork's wider Green Doctor delivery. Our Green Doctor service helps households stay warm, stay well, and save money, all while reducing carbon through home energy and water efficiency. In an average year across our federation, we deliver roughly 60,000 home energy advice visits to vulnerable households, helping them to identify more than £5m worth of savings on their utility bills and referring many to other forms of financial support.

As of the end of May 2021, the Energising Communities programme has supported 975 households with energy advice and support, with 148 households receiving additional support due to more complex support needs.

The programme has also provided households with over **3,751** small energy saving measures. These include:

1689

LED lightbulbs

879

Radiator panels

275

Door draught
proofing strips

158

Window draught
proofing strips

132

Dehumidifier

110

Hot water bottles

64

CO monitor

47

Shower heads

31

Letterbox brushes

6

Emergency heaters

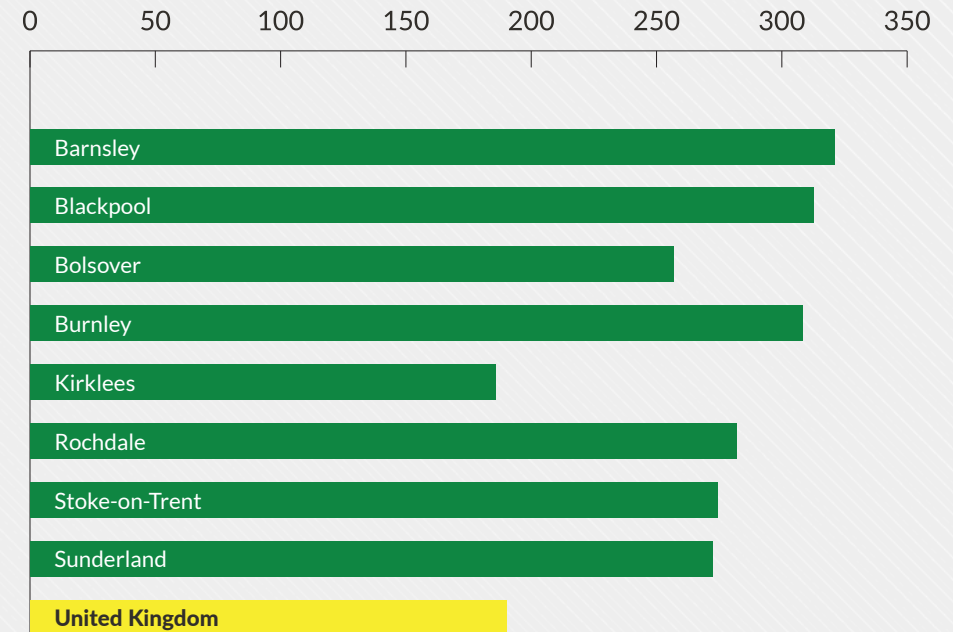
What we learned

Programme Areas

The programme areas were selected on the basis that drivers of fuel poverty were prevalent. For example, 19% of households in Stoke-on-Trent receive means tested or disability benefits and health outcomes in Burnley are significantly worse than national average. They were also new areas for Groundwork's home energy efficiency services and areas in which a similar service was not already available.

Many of these areas have also been very badly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Sadly, except for Kirklees, every area targeted by the programme experienced a higher-than-average rate of Covid-19 deaths.

The table shows the number of deaths within 28 days of a positive Covid-19 test per 100,000 population in each of the programme areas and in the UK as a whole (1):



Some of these areas were among the worst affected in the country in terms of lives lost. Barnsley had the second highest number of deaths per 100,000 population of any upper tier local authority area in the UK. While the causes of these high mortality rates are complex, links between Covid-19 mortality, deprivation and prior low levels of health are well-documented (2). This reinforces the reasons that these areas were selected for Energising Communities and confirms the high levels of need in the communities that the programme was designed to work with.

Because of low take-up, one of the initial areas targeted by the programme was later changed from Bolsover to Kirklees. Other changes were to extend some programme areas. Stoke-on-Trent was extended to include two neighbouring areas of North Staffordshire: Newcastle-under-Lyme and Staffordshire Moorlands. This brought the programme into line with the geographic scope of referral agencies and the other fuel poverty charity working in the area, which offers large installations. Rochdale was also added alongside Burnley, as a neighbouring area with similar levels of fuel poverty.

¹Gov.uk (2021), 'Covid-19 in the UK: Deaths within 28 days of positive test by date of death', <https://coronavirus.data.gov.uk/details/deaths>, figures as of 8/04/21, accessed 9/04/21.

²Marmot, M. (2021), Build Back Fairer: the Covid-19 Marmot Review <https://www.health.org.uk/publications/build-back-fairer-the-covid-19-marmot-review>



The Covid-19 pandemic and fuel poverty

The Covid-19 pandemic has made the need to tackle fuel poverty even more urgent. There is clear evidence on the links between cold temperatures and respiratory problems; living in a cold environment can reduce an individual's resistance to respiratory infections and increase the risk of illness (3). Therefore, people living in cold homes are likely to be at higher risk of serious illness from Covid-19.

The pandemic has had a serious impact on many households, affecting both health and incomes. This has made the need for the Energising Communities programme more acute. Research by Citizens Advice found that 2.1 million households were behind on their energy bills in September 2020, which is 600,000 more than in the previous February (4).

Community Energy Advisors are seeing more urgent and complex cases. They found that many people who had been just about managing before the pandemic were now experiencing fuel poverty for the first time because of reduced income, job losses and higher costs. Lockdown has required people to spend more time at home, increasing energy use and therefore driving up costs. Other costs, such as feeding children who usually receive free school meals, add to the financial pressure on some households.

Some of the Trusts felt that, as well as creating more need, the pandemic had exposed existing need in the communities they work with that may previously have flown under the radar. Some people referred to the programme had been identified by local authorities or other agencies through pandemic-related emergency relief but may have been struggling with the cost of energy for some time prior to the pandemic. On the other hand, there was concern that some households which did not qualify for the official emergency support schemes had become more isolated and harder to reach because of the lockdowns.

³Public Health England (2014), Fuel poverty and cold home-related health problems https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/documents/Fuel_poverty_health_inequalities.pdf

⁴Citizens Advice (2020), Recovery or Ruin? The role of accessible support in helping energy consumers through the crisis <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/our-work/policy/policy-research-topics/energy-policy-research-and-consultation-responses/energy-policy-research/recovery-or-ruin-the-role-of-accessible-support-in-helping-energy-consumers-through-the-crisis/>



The **eligibility criteria** for the Energising Communities programme have been useful in ensuring that people are able to access help with household energy when they need it. To qualify for assistance as part of the programme, households need to meet one or more of the following criteria:

- + Living on a low income
- + Living in debt
- + Aged over 65
- + People with physical health issues that would be affected by a cold home e.g., cardiovascular or respiratory illness
- + People with severe mental illness
- + People with dementia
Disabled people
- + Young people and families containing children under the age of 5 (especially single parents)
- + Pregnant women
- + Living in emergency accommodation
- + Living in poor housing conditions

Several Community Energy Advisors commented that the relatively wide criteria meant that they were almost always able to provide support to households that needed it. In contrast, on other programmes with stricter eligibility requirements based on older definitions of fuel poverty, Community Energy Advisors have sometimes had to turn away people who would benefit because they do not meet the programme's eligibility criteria.

Speaking about their experiences

It is important to note that working with households in crisis can be emotionally challenging for Community Energy Advisors and therefore adequate support needs to be in place for staff. Some have reported that the role has been more 'mentally draining' during the pandemic because of the challenging circumstances and complexity of cases they are dealing with. Trusts have adapted by increasing the amount of support and supervision provided to staff, to ensure that their wellbeing is protected.

Trusts have also received interest in the programme from people living outside the programme areas, either via phone or social media. This suggests that there is scope to continue to extend the service into a wider area to meet the needs of more households experiencing fuel poverty.

Personal stories

Grace was furloughed and spending more time at home over lockdown while home schooling her son. Increased time in the home left her facing higher gas and electricity bills while struggling on a reduced income and limited benefits.

The Green Doctor was able to refer her to National Energy Action who gave her a £140 voucher for her gas as she missed out on the warm home discount. The Green Doctor gave her some advice on simple ways to reduce her energy bills such as turning the thermostat and radiator valves down to make her gas last longer on the meters and giving her some free energy saving small measures such as LED lightbulbs.

The Green Doctor spoke to United Utilities with her and got her water rates capped for this year's and last year's bill, which **removed £459.31** from her debt immediately. We were then able to set up an affordable weekly direct debit which pays for her current water bill and something towards the debt. United Utilities have also put her on a payment match scheme so if Grace keeps up her fortnightly payments over the next few years, United Utilities will **deduct a further £2,210** off her debt.



Groundwork is a fantastic organisation. They are here to help. The Green Doctor has helped me get through lockdown and the latest spell of cold weather which has been a huge relief. It's been a difficult time but I feel as if a huge weight has been lifted



- **Grace, Manchester**

Over the past few months, our Green Doctors have noticed an increase in calls from people who need help with things that fall outside the service remit. Green Doctors are pleased to be able to help in these instances, even when the initial reason for contact was not within our usual parameters.

One person called for advice regarding grants to upgrade her existing faulty storage heaters to a more effective and efficient gas central heating system. Carol was not in receipt of any of the qualifying benefits and had some savings set aside to cover funeral costs which meant she was unable to apply for most grants.

After a short conversation with the client, our Green Doctor was able to provide details for the governments Green Home Grant and advised her to put her savings in to a funeral plan as this would possibly bring her under the qualifying threshold, making her eligible for a grant. The Green Doctor was also able to give more immediate support by providing a Winter Warmth Pack, helping to make the property a little warmer and energy efficient during a particularly cold period.

Since the consultation, the client has started a funeral plan which has given her extra protection and made her eligible for the Green Homes Grant scheme. Since then, she has been in touch to ask advice about switching her provider with which we were able to guide her through the process and save her over £100.

I was very impressed by the help given to me by Andy from the Groundwork Green Doctor scheme. His advice was invaluable regarding all the small household savings I could make with energy saving suggestions, changing light bulbs, draft proofing etc. The leaflet and guidance he provided me, regarding correct use of night storage heaters, was so helpful. I really appreciated the contact made to me and would recommend anyone use this service.



- **Carol*, Stoke-on-Trent**

This case study shows how the Green Doctor project can help people in different situations, even if the initial reason for contacting was not within our capabilities.

*Name changed to protect the resident's privacy



Setting up referral pathways

The usual methods Trusts employ to engage with partners and communities were impossible during the Covid-19 pandemic, making setting up referral pathways much more challenging. For most programmes, Community Energy Advisors would spend time meeting partner organisations, attending events and coffee mornings and speaking to people face-to-face. Chances to do this were limited because most Trusts had only started to roll out the programme a few weeks before the first national lockdown in March 2020.

This meant that building new relationships was more challenging than it would otherwise have been. Staff in partner organisations were often occupied dealing with the immediate crisis, with less time to engage with the programme. For example, one Trust reported that many of their contacts at a local authority were moved into frontline roles such as coordinating food parcels. In other organisations key staff were furloughed. For staff that were available, fuel poverty was often not on the top of their list of priorities because of the time of year and the warm spring weather.

Over time, the work that Community Energy Advisors put into building these relationships paid off and referral pathways picked up momentum. Partners appeared to have more capacity to engage with the programme from the autumn onwards, leading to more referrals and more households benefiting from the service.

However, some have concerns about a drop-off in referrals during the summer months and the timing of the programme closing to new referrals during the height of winter.

Reflecting on the learning from the early days of the pandemic, some Trusts wished that they had started engagement activities sooner, though no one could have anticipated the scale of the disruption to come. Others were aware of the danger of 'over promoting' a service when you are working with partners remotely and repeatedly chasing the same contact. For contrast, when attending face-to-face events Community Energy Advisors would often meet multiple people from a partner organisation and promote awareness of the service that way, rather than relying on a single point of contact to spread the message.





Importance of social infrastructure

The social infrastructure of an area – “the networks of spaces, facilities, institutions, and groups that create affordances for social connection” (5) – plays an important role in connecting people to programmes like Energising Communities. Where Trusts had existing connections with partner organisations, it was easier to get referral networks up and running, though the pandemic still slowed the rate of referrals.

Having a positive relationship with local authorities and large housing associations had a hugely significant impact on the number of referrals received. The wide range of skills of some of the larger Community Energy Advisor teams has helped to build these relationships in some places. For example, in Yorkshire the Community Energy Advisor team includes Domestic Energy Assessors able to do EPCs and through this route they have developed a working relationship with a large housing provider who had not previously engaged with Energising Communities, creating a route through which to offer the service to households.

Having a physical community hub was an important asset for the Energising Communities programme in Blackpool. @theGrange is a community centre managed by Groundwork Cheshire, Lancashire and Merseyside and owned by Blackpool Council.

It is at the centre of the Grange Park estate, one of the most deprived neighbourhoods in the country. This centre meant that Trust staff had strong relationships with people in the community and were able to speak to them directly about the energy efficiency services. When government guidance allowed, Community Energy Advisors were able to meet people face-to-face in the centre (with social distancing and personal protective measures) to discuss their energy bills. The strong relationship with the council that the Trust have developed through running the centre has meant that they have an ‘open door’ to teams in the council who can refer households to their services.

Trusts also receive referrals for Energising Communities from other Groundwork programmes, for example employment and skills programmes, and can refer people on to other services if they identify another need while helping a household with its energy use.

⁵Latham, A. & Layton, J. (2019), ‘Social infrastructure and the public life of cities: Studying urban sociality and public spaces’, *Geography Compass* 13



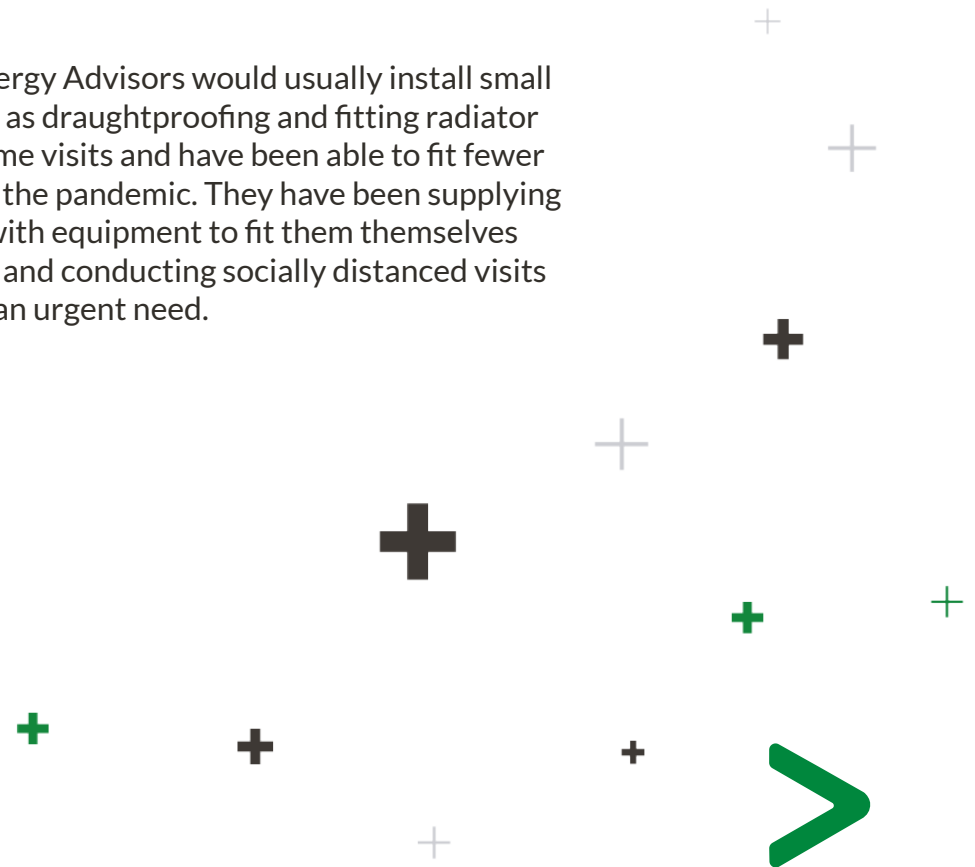
Adapting to remote delivery

Many of the Community Energy Advisors involved in delivering the Energising Communities programme found that **delivering energy advice over the phone required a substantially different skillset to delivering in person but that being able to offer a telephone service added value for some households.**

Providing the service via telephone created some barriers: it could be more difficult to gain the trust of householders who might be concerned about fraud, for example, and more difficult to build a rapport. One Trust found that householders were less likely to trust a phone number with a different area code and adapted by having a 0800 number that is not area specific.

Helping householders to understand their bill and find key information needed for accurate energy price comparisons could be more challenging over the phone than in person. Home visits also enable the Community Energy Advisors to pick up more information about the house and the situation of the household, meaning that they can suggest further measures or refer them on to other services which can help. The same outcomes were achieved in most cases, but the process could be more disjointed for the householder.

Community Energy Advisors would usually install small measures, such as draughtproofing and fitting radiator foils, during home visits and have been able to fit fewer of these during the pandemic. They have been supplying householders with equipment to fit them themselves where possible and conducting socially distanced visits where there is an urgent need.



During home visits, the Community Energy Advisor can fit small measures in the home while waiting to speak to a call handler at an energy company and the householder is present to give consent for the Community Energy Advisor to negotiate on their behalf. Three-way conference calls are used to replicate this experience remotely, with the Community Energy Advisor waiting in the 'on hold' queue and dialling the householder back in when the call is connected.

However, there were also some benefits to the telephone service. For some households, **speaking to a Community Energy Advisor by phone is more convenient and preferable to having someone in their home.** In cases where people only needed light touch support, speaking to them by phone was more efficient and environmentally friendly. Most of the Trusts plan to offer a hybrid model in future, with initial phone calls and follow-up for those who want more support or to install energy saving measures.



Adding value



Fuel vouchers

From late 2020, Community Energy Advisors were able to provide households with emergency fuel vouchers through the Energising Communities programme. Being able to offer the fuel vouchers has been a great asset, allowing Community Energy Advisors to help people in an immediate crisis as well as supporting them to reduce their energy costs in the longer term. The vouchers have also helped to stimulate more referrals, as when other agencies know that Groundwork Community Energy Advisors are able to issue fuel vouchers, they are more motivated to refer.

Trusts are conscious of the danger of households becoming dependent on fuel vouchers. Therefore, all voucher recipients also received the full Energising Communities advice service, helping households to take steps to make their energy costs manageable without the need for fuel vouchers in the future.

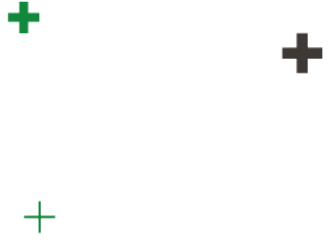
Despite their advantages, Trusts are conscious that fuel vouchers are only available to households using pre-payment meters. Households that had lost income during the pandemic and were experiencing fuel poverty for the first time were less likely to benefit as many of these households were paying bills by direct debit. A small number of households relying on oil central heating were also unable to benefit.

A joined-up experience for households



Delivering Energising Communities during the Covid-19 pandemic has reinforced the importance of providing a smooth 'client journey'. Remote delivery meant that the experiences of households was sometimes more disjointed than it would be with a home visit, often conducted over several calls. As a result, it was easier for households to get in touch with Community Energy Advisors again if they had further questions or new problems with their energy. This was positive for households but put pressure on limited staff resources as this had not been part of the initial programme design.

In response to the pandemic, a dedicated website was set up for the programme which helped Trusts to promote the service and manage referrals. However, further work could be done on ensuring that households are able to find the information they need and key resources such as referral forms as quickly as possible. Because Groundwork's energy advice services are provided through different programmes in different areas, finding the information relevant to an individual can be complex and more could be done to simplify this process.





Community Energy Advisors often work with households who do not have good access to the internet or are not confident online. Therefore, **it is important that the design of similar programmes does not disadvantage people who are digitally excluded.** Working over the telephone and with referral partners helps to mitigate this risk.

There is also potential for more join-up between Groundwork services and programmes, to ensure that households who are involved in more than one experience a holistic service.

Tackling climate change

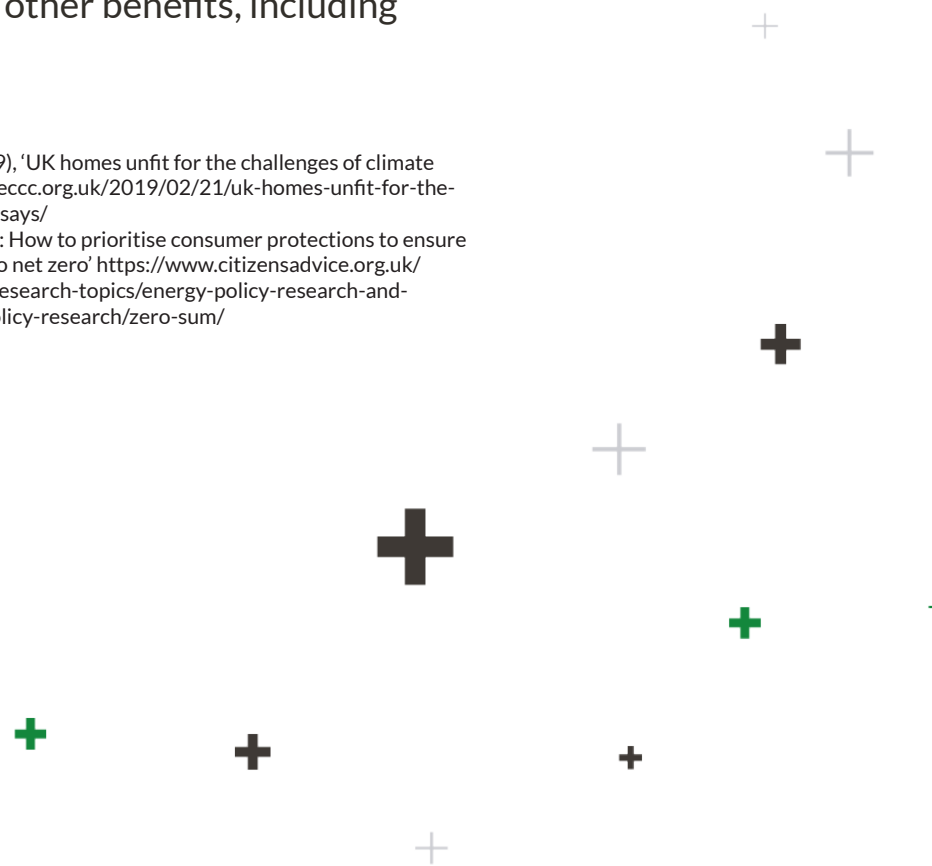
The conversations between Community Energy Advisors and households **focus on how energy efficiency measures can reduce their bills, protect their health, and make them more comfortable in their homes.** However, reducing energy consumption in the home also has other benefits, including when it comes to tackling climate change.

Energy use in homes accounts for 41% of the UK's carbon emissions (6), so increasing home energy efficiency and shifting to low carbon heating will be vital to meeting the UK's net-zero target. However, public awareness of the changes that need to be made remains low: only 38% of people are aware that they will need to change the way their home is heated but 90% of homes need to install low carbon heating systems to meet net zero (7).

The model of energy advice delivered through the Energising Communities programme could be scaled to enable more people to make informed decisions about how they heat their homes in the future and ensure that households get the most from low carbon options such as heat pumps.

⁶Climate Change Committee (2019), 'UK homes unfit for the challenges of climate change, CCC says', <https://www.theccc.org.uk/2019/02/21/uk-homes-unfit-for-the-challenges-of-climate-change-ccc-says/>

⁷Citizens Advice (2020), 'Zero sum: How to prioritise consumer protections to ensure nobody is left behind on the path to net zero' <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/our-work/policy/policy-research-topics/energy-policy-research-and-consultation-responses/energy-policy-research/zero-sum/>





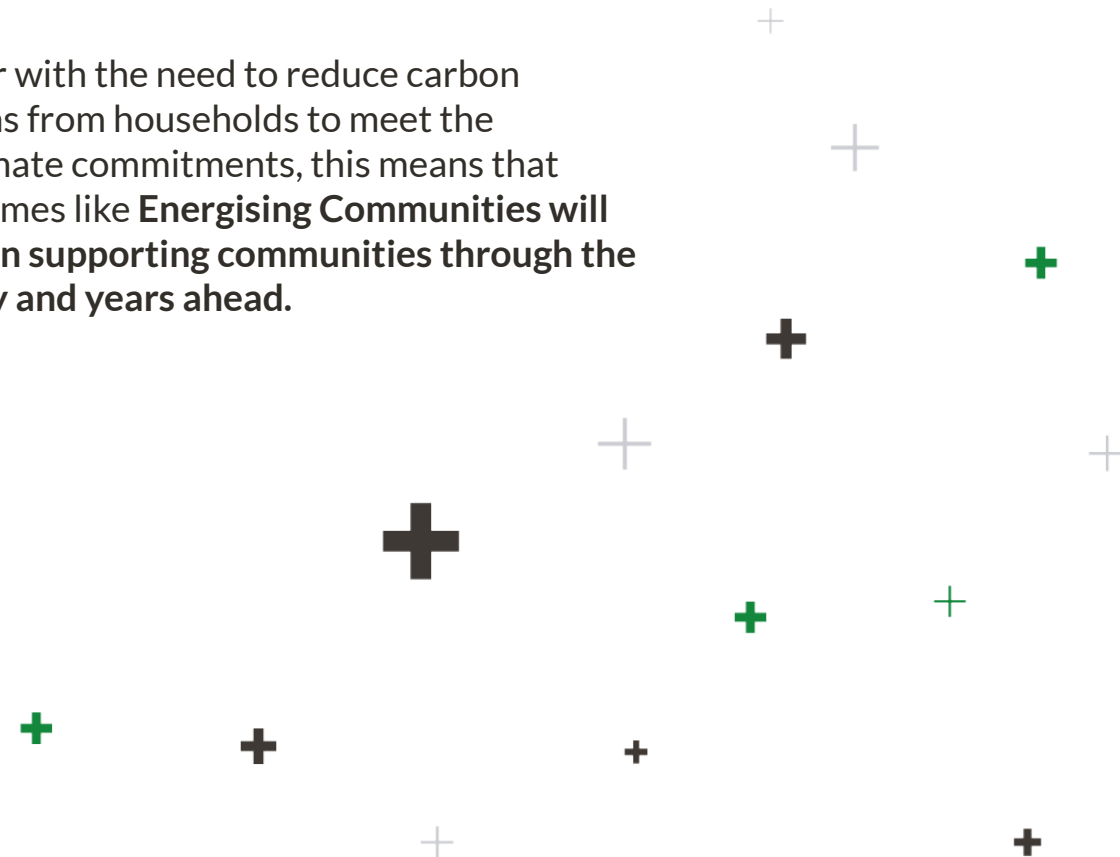
Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has created challenges in the first year of the Energising Communities programme, but it has also underlined its importance and created some opportunities. The experience of Community Energy Advisers on this programme underlines the vital role that strong social infrastructure – such as community hubs and relationships with other local organisations – plays in successfully delivering services for communities. Trust takes time and can be more difficult to build when working digitally.

However, working digitally created some opportunities for Trusts to develop their energy efficiency services and some of the changes are likely to be taken forward. In the future, it is likely that Groundwork will offer energy advice through a blend of face-to-face and telephone support, which may help to reach more people and increase efficiency.

The pandemic has made the need to tackle fuel poverty even more urgent, with Trusts reporting that they are dealing with households in more complex and urgent circumstances than ever before.

Together with the need to reduce carbon emissions from households to meet the UK's climate commitments, this means that programmes like **Energising Communities will be vital in supporting communities through the recovery and years ahead.**





GROUNDWORK & GREEN DOCTOR ENERGISING COMMUNITIES

To find out more about how Green Doctor works in your area, **please get in touch:**

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