

# **Coming in from the Cold: A case study of community engagement in tackling fuel poverty**

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## **Abstract**

Despite the government's top-down policies to reduce fuel poverty, the number of households considered fuel poor remains persistently high. This paper aims to assess the potential of local intervention in reducing fuel poverty through community-centred initiatives such as the Winter Warmth and Healthy Home campaigns. These schemes have been put in place in Kensington and Chelsea so that policy trickles down to the fuel poor through community-specific networks. We utilise snowball sampling to map the hidden networks of interaction between key stakeholders. Qualitative data was also collected. This ranged from the use of semi-structured interviews with a host of national and local charitable organisations to surveys with borough residents. Through analysing the interactions and relationships between stakeholders, the strengths and shortcomings of the networks were identified. Our findings indicate that information dispersed via local organisations is more commonly trusted and acted upon by the fuel poor. The deeper connection between the community and these organisations also allows identification of households vulnerable to fuel poverty; many of whom would have otherwise been missed by government policies. However, we recognize that there are coordination obstacles between national and local groups which create disparities in the support available to the fuel poor in different regions. Overall, a model of community-led initiatives has to be complemented with the strengthening of local networks and national support.

Keywords: Fuel Poverty, Community Organisations, Decentralization, Coordination, Networks

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## Introduction

“Fuel poverty can damage people’s quality of life and health, as well as impose wider costs on the community” (DECC, 2015:7). This problem has been the focus of much discussion amongst academics and policy makers within the UK for some time (Wright, 2004; Barnardo, 2012). However, the government’s commitment in tackling this problem in the recent decade has produced ambiguous results and has been relatively ineffective, as the following chart indicates.

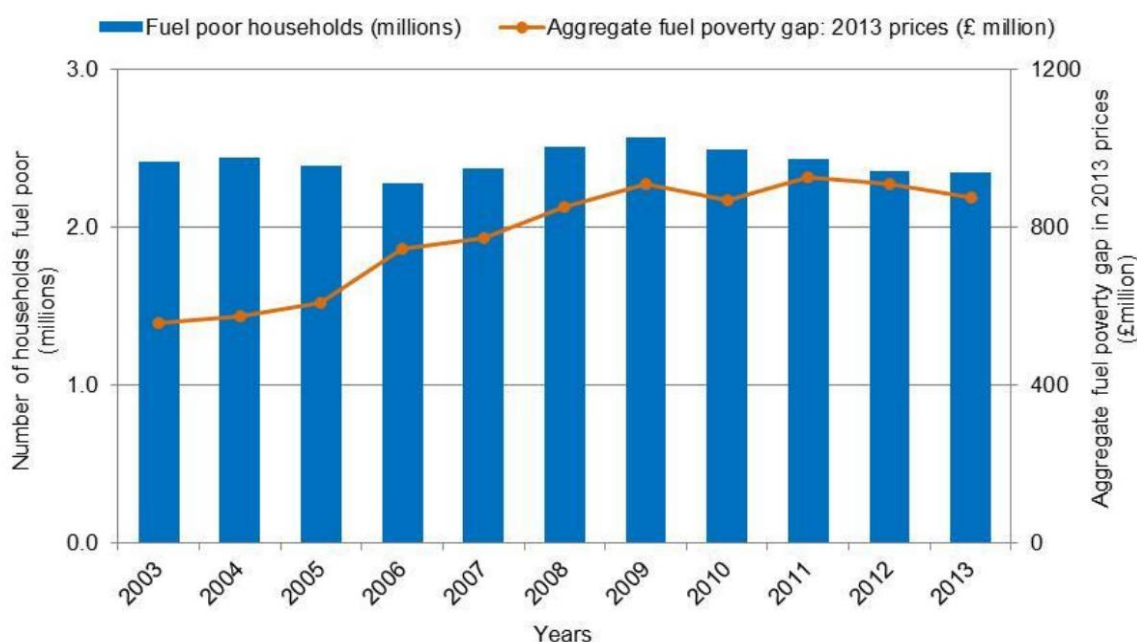


Figure 1: “Fuel Poverty in England 2003-2013 Using the LIHC indicator”, (DECC report, 2015)

In recent years, debate on effective fuel poverty reduction has been shifting towards community and charity based involvement, rather than centralised approaches (Reeves 2016). The key government body in charge of tackling fuel poverty, the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC), recognised that “community-led action can often tackle challenges more effectively than the government alone, developing solutions to meet local

needs, and involving local people” (DECC, 2014). Existing research focuses on a broad level of community-based approach including various social agents. Thus, there is a gap of research in the specific role of local charities in tackling the problem.

Our findings show that community-based approaches through local charities are effective to some extent in tackling fuel poverty. Our research reveals the crucial role they play in complementing national fuel poverty strategies. More importantly, “trust” is identified as one of the key lubricant in this machine.

## **Literature Review**

The harmful effects of fuel poverty has been well documented by various institutions (Liddell and Morris, 2010), sparking intensive research of its determinants and methods to tackle the issue. In 2012, the measurement of fuel poverty was redefined and applied by the government (Hills, 2012). However, this indicator remains hard to be employed by people on the front line to identify the fuel poor due to sensitivity of information required.

Parallel to the developments in the field of fuel poverty, there has been extensive research on the capacity of ‘voluntary and community organisations’ to deliver welfare support (Cairns et al., 2005). As suggested by the 2014 report from DECC, further evidence is required to examine the effectiveness of community-level intervention in tackling fuel poverty. A recent attempt by Reeves (2016) to fill this gap examines multiple community-level organisations in isolation. However, this ignores the possibility of formation of community-level network. Our

research builds upon this foundation by bringing the concept of structural hole (Burt, 2004) into resolving the problem. A network of charities could potentially fill up the hole between national policy and the fuel poor, facilitating the flow of information and reducing fuel poverty in the UK.

## **Methodology**

To bring our research into a real-world context, and also to facilitate data gathering through engagement with local stakeholders, a case study of The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea was carried out. This particular borough was appropriate for our case study due to several reasons. Firstly, the level of fuel poverty measured by the LIHC approach in that borough remains persistently high at 10% (DECC data 2010-2013), therefore making the problem of fuel poverty relevant. Secondly, two community-oriented charity programmes were running in the area at the time of this research. The “Healthy Homes” and the “Wither Warmth” campaigns allowed us to identify stakeholders within the programmes, as well as gather qualitative feedback from the citizens. Finally, Kensington and Chelsea is a borough of contrast, i.e. considerable inequalities exist in multiple dimensions such as incomes, housing ownership status, employment status etc (London DataStore, 2016). The heterogeneity within a community makes profiling of individuals who are vulnerable to fuel poverty more difficult. As the following map demonstrates, the disparities in fuel poverty levels within the borough were also high.

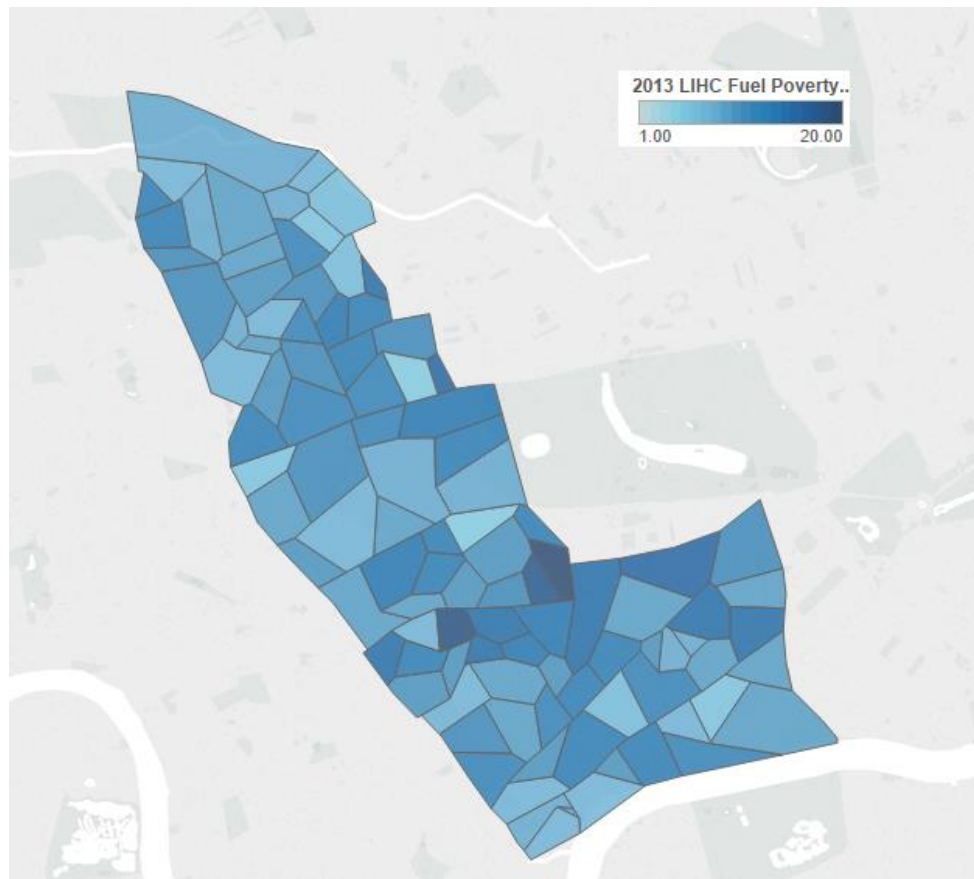


Figure 2: 'Fuel poverty levels in Kensington and Chelsea in 2013 [% households fuel poor], LIHC indicator.' (Darker colour shows more fuel poor wards). Data taken from DECC.

Our research utilises snowball sampling. This method relies on a chain of referrals by interviewed subjects to trace the social networks responsible for the information flow from national to local groups. This presents two important advantages. First, it enables the identification of the fuel poor not formally recognized by government initiatives. One of these 'hidden' groups is identified by Ramsay and Petty (2003): those who are fuel poor but exceed the threshold of official income level to be recognized as fuel poor. Based on referrals made by reliable networks, snowball sampling enables the identification of these 'hidden' groups unacknowledged by government statistics, and who would otherwise shy away from other research methodologies (Atkinson and Flint, 2001). Second, it facilitates the mapping of charitable organisations working together to target the fuel poor using informal networks. Snowball sampling allows us to obtain referral to other organisations working in the field -

information usually left undisclosed on official websites. Through snowball sampling, we are also able to map a coherent social network of local charities, national organisations, local governments and the fuel poor community based on referrals obtained via this unique sampling method.

Once identified, we conduct semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders to obtain a deeper understanding of their organisational structure. Organisations include Age UK, Kensington and Chelsea Foundation, and Nucleus legal advice centre. We focus on how local community organisations coordinate with each other, with national parent organisations, and target the fuel poor. To complement this, we also conduct semi-qualitative surveys with the citizens of Kensington and Chelsea to gauge their perception and awareness of ongoing initiatives by community-level charities. The relationships in question rely heavily on non-quantifiable concepts such as trust, and is better captured through qualitative analysis.

By combining all data collected we are able to visualise the dynamics of trust and information flows through a network map. This details how policy reaches the fuel poor via different organisations in the network, and the strength of communication between different stakeholders. We analyse the feasibility of using community based charities to reach the fuel poor and bypass weaker links, for example between energy companies and fuel poor customers.

## **Results/Discussion**

We analysed the web of interaction between the fuel poor, charity organizations that function as gatekeepers of information and organizations at the national level. With reference to the social network map we have constructed in figure 3, we stratify these social groups into three clusters of descending hierarchy: on the national level, energy companies, national and local governments and the NHS collectively form a group empowered to legislate and execute national policies; on the intermediate level, there exists a loose coalition of charitable organizations, general practitioners (GPs) and some local government organs; on the 'ground', the fuel poor community is a heterogeneous composite of subpopulations from refugees to social housing tenants.



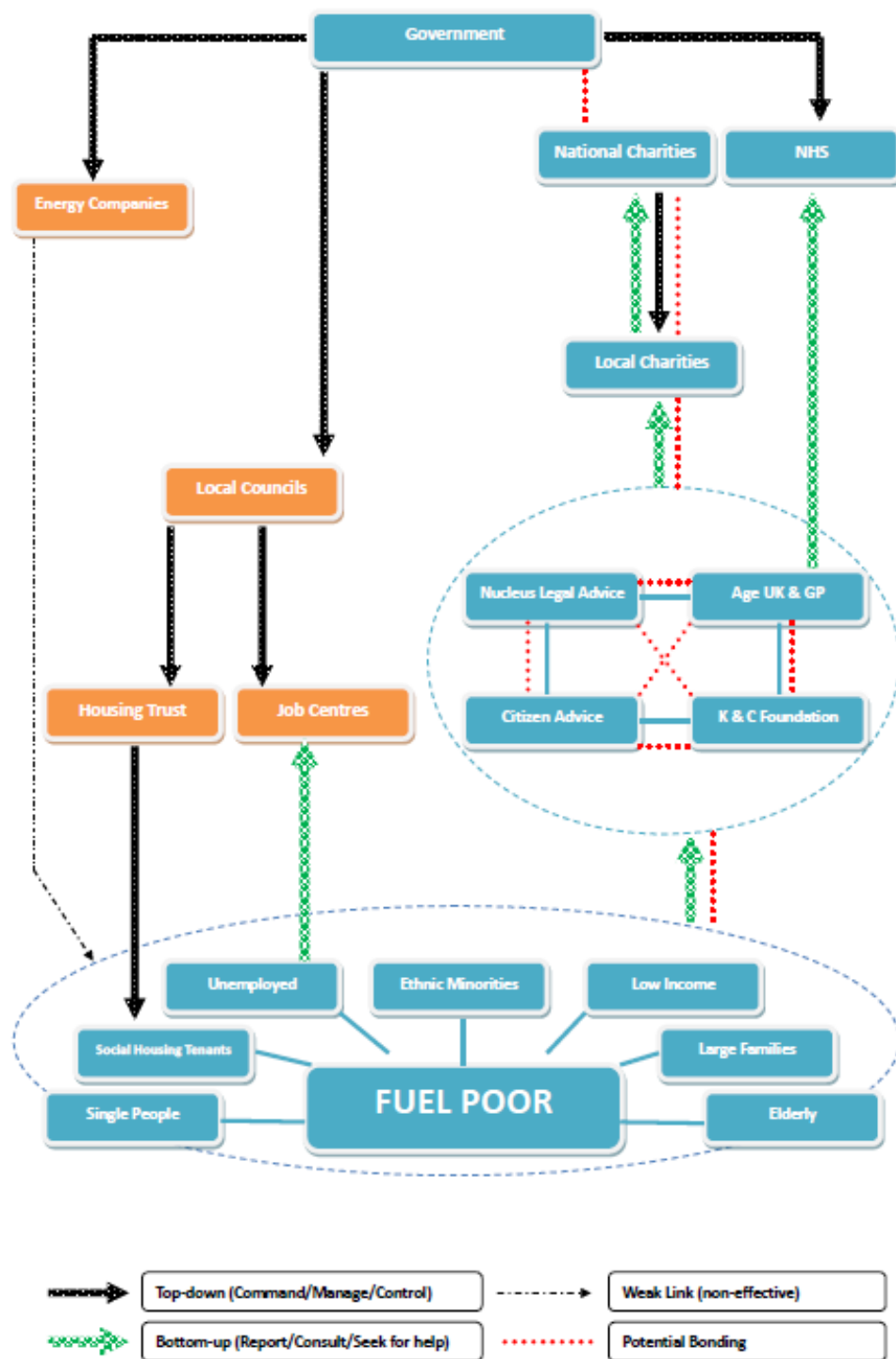


Figure 3: “Network Map of the Key Social Agents within the Fuel Poverty Framework”

With a network map and interview results, we are able to point specifically to the unique niche of charity organizations in solving the problems of fuel poverty. We first explain how we derive such a map through exploring the level of trust embedded in network relations between local charities and the poor. We argue that the higher confidence displayed towards local charities compared to national entities allows the coalition of charities to access the fuel poor more easily than national groups. At the same time, charity networks also have important access to entities at the national level. This allows them to occupy an intermediate position straddling between the 'national' and 'local' level. Next, because of their unique position, they acquire unique comparative advantages through their role as brokers and mediators between the 'national' and the 'local'.

## **Trust**

One of the recurring themes in most data we have obtained was the issue of trust. In the interviews conducted with both charity representatives and the citizens, there is repeated reference to the degree of trust they had in the party executing the official national policy - the Energy Company Obligation (ECO). As a senior representative of the national office of Age UK has put it, "people don't *trust* energy companies" and this "undermines the effectiveness of the government programme". As noted by Rotter (1971) trust enhances cooperation and is an important lubricant in social processes. In the following section, we disentangle the reasons responsible for the breakdown of trust between entities at the 'national' and 'local' level, and attempt to show that the unique position charities occupy in the 'intermediate' level best position them to penetrate the exclusive social networks of the fuel poor.

In our fieldwork, we encounter a process of “othering” evident in the language of local residents in Royal Kensington and Chelsea. A participant who mistakenly thought we were representatives of the energy company remarked how “*they* (the energy companies) steal my money” but when referring to local charity organizations characterize them in terms of “*our* community”. This language of ‘othering’ and impersonalization of large energy conglomerates is evident through the usage of ‘they’. It is juxtaposed with the language of ownership and belonging evident in the use of ‘our’. This is unsurprising because communication between national entities and the network of fuel poor community occurs through electronic messages, computer-generated letters and digital receipts. We highlight this weak relationship through a black dotted line between energy companies and local citizens in our network map.

Our intuition that the mediation of communication through impersonal channels erodes trust is further confirmed in another interview. Describing their activity in Kensington and Chelsea the representative of the Nucleus Legal Advice Centre emphasised: “a lot of people walk up and use us as the first person who they contact in the community [...]”. The ability to “walk up” implies easy access to charity organizations, and is a significant mechanism that allows breaking down of barriers of communication between the fuel poor community and local charity organizations.

Additionally, we also observe a deeper cleavage between local government organisations and the fuel poor community. A social tenant we have surveyed, remarked that “schemes organised by local councils are not effective because the grants given deal with Housing Trust instead of tenants *directly*.” The emphasis on the ‘*directness*’ of communication

indicates that local residents are more likely to trust entities they have a personal *direct* relationship with.

We suggest that the communication breakdown between 'national' and 'local' entities results from the lack of presence of national-level stakeholders in local communities. By including local charity networks into the individual's cognitive categorization of 'ingroups' leads to a bias of trust demonstrated towards 'ingroup' members (local charity organisations) and vilification of outgroup members (national entities). A climate of distrust is sowed based on perceived membership in a group (Brewer 1981, 1996). This significantly curtails the effectiveness of top-down national policies when national entities are perceived to be 'different' from local communities.

Additionally, most of the charity organisations we surveyed have an organizational structure comprising a unified national organisation with semi-autonomous local branches. This structure not only ensures that these charity networks are embedded in the networks of the local fuel poor community, but also have important connections to agents at the 'national' level, as in case of Age UK and Nucleus Legal Advice Centre.

This is a situation that is perfectly encapsulated in Burt's (2004) concept of 'structural holes', which refer to situations where complementary information exist between two groups that do not overlap. In this case, national entities wish to alleviate fuel poverty but have no information in terms of which groups are particularly vulnerable. These charities therefore have positional advantages because they are straddled between national policymakers and local fuel poor residents, and function as a bridge for the exchange of information between the two otherwise non-overlapping groups.

## **Holistic Profiling**

Prevailing literature identifies that fuel poverty as the result of the interplay of three key factors: income (which determines the ability to afford heating), energy efficiency (which determines how much energy is required to heat your home to a certain standard), and household requirements (which denotes all personal characteristics of your household that lead to differing energy requirements) (Walker, 2012). However national policy is limited in its ability to observe these characteristics for each household to assess their vulnerability to fuel poverty. Rather than attempt this, existing strategy predominantly targets low income households and the elderly. This limits the effectiveness of their targeting of the fuel poor because official statistics cannot capture the multiple dimensions of poverty.

Due to their community engagement, local initiatives are successful in the accurate identification and subsequent supporting of the most vulnerable fuel poor. The Winter Warmth campaign by the Kensington and Chelsea foundation exemplifies such an initiative. Winter Fuel Payment given to wealthy pensioners is donated to a fund and transferred to unsupported members of the community who are in need. In this specific example identification is done through a network of local initiatives which include Nucleus Legal Centre, Citizen Advice Bureau and Age UK. Through direct interaction with individuals in the community over a prolonged period of time, they found their local ties to be strong. Our research found that engaging with the community through a range of initiatives heightened their perceived presence in the community. Such engagement includes handing out cold weather recipe books, organising workshops in schools, etc.

Moreover, the distinct focus of different local charities allows them to target specific groups in the community. Nucleus Legal Centre is a prime example of this; the coordinator of Winter Warmth at the advice centre noted that due to the legal advice provided to Somali asylum seekers they have established a dialogue with an otherwise marginalised community. Also, their benefits advice service connects them with immobile people who may not be eligible for the financial support offered to the disabled. However, a caseworker for a local advice centre noted that there are vulnerable groups which still remain without local support: those with health issues who cannot “access resources” and those with problematic immigration statuses. Some of these concerns may be answered by other local charities, for example, local charities collaborating with GPs effectively target the fuel poor with health issues.

## **Policy Design**

Despite the benefits that community-based networks offer within the area of Kensington and Chelsea, we find that there are significant limits to this approach when government policy is itself inadequate. Community networks have been identified as a useful method of disseminating information and advice relating to policy and existing initiatives. However, our results show informed individuals can still be resistant to the initiatives. This is because government schemes are ill-designed, and ring-fence funds for the elderly and income poor. Without awareness of who the fuel poor are, policies have not been tailored to complement their needs. For example, groups with higher energy needs may not qualify for home improvements under the ECO but cannot allow themselves to become indebted under the Green Deal. Local organisations can offer little to these groups to lift them out of fuel poverty.

The Winter Warmth campaign offers an alternative model for allocating resources to tackle fuel poor within the community. Theoretically it is desirable to use social networks in this way to make policy more efficient. However, two key issues may limit its functionality. Firstly, inequality of support for the fuel poor may exist amongst different areas depending on the difference in awareness of local charities and the extent of their links with the community. A senior representative of national Age UK we interviewed, reveals that fuel poverty is “recognized in some places but not everywhere”, hinting that a collective coordination of efforts by all local branches to eliminate fuel poverty cannot be achieved in a decentralized charity organization. In other words, there might be potential collective action problem that arises between multiple agents (Olsen, 1965). Secondly, this method relies on those in need approaching local charities, whereas government initiatives such as winter fuel payments will be allocated to all individuals they wish to target. This is demonstrated by the coloured arrows in Fig.3. The black arrows demonstrate control of the above body over all the agents in the group below. However the green arrows pointing up demonstrate how some, but not all of the agents in the group below may seek help from the agent above. In switching to a local allocation model, there is a trade-off between the extent of holistic profiling and assisting vulnerable groups that are hard to reach.

An alternative model for allowing community-based organisations to influence policy design considers a bottom up approach. Using the knowledge and experience of local charities who work with the fuel poor community, there could be more dialogue with the government on reforming policy. This would be synonymous with the adding of an arrow between government and national charities in Fig.3. A possible limitation of this approach is that by solidifying links between governments and local charities, trust between charities and the local community dissipates. More research could reveal if any information sharing between

the government and local impartial gatekeepers automatically devalues the relationship between the fuel poor and the gatekeepers themselves.

## **Conclusion**

The case study of Kensington and Chelsea highlights how coordination across local organisations allows greater communication with the local community. This allows better holistic identification of the fuel poor than current methods used by the government, which only focussed on those with low income and the elderly. Trust was identified as the key determinant that made these relationships function and permitted information and support to flow from the government to the household. From analysing all agents from government to households as a wider network, we identified that charity organisations function best as a bridge between national-level entities and the local fuel poor community.

However, we recognise that the borough of Kensington and Chelsea is not representative of local charity networks nationwide. Many regions may not feature the same levels of coordination between charities and engagement in fuel poverty issues. The scope for using the local organisation 'model' as a key policy tool across the UK still needs further research, including the potential for charity 'coalitions' to act as a national player to influence policy and coordinate action on fuel poverty.



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## Appendices

LSE GROUPS Fuel Poverty Research Survey

Date:

We are students of the London School of Economics and Political Sciences taking part in a group research project. We would really appreciate it if you would accept giving some of your time in order to answer a few questions. We guarantee that your answers will remain anonymous and will be used for the purpose of this research project only.

**1) Are you a resident of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea?**

Yes/No

**2) Do you think that inadequate heating of one's household causes the following? (circle the ones you agree with)**

- |                    |                          |
|--------------------|--------------------------|
| i. Physical health | iii. Income poverty      |
| ii. Mental health  | iv. Strain on NHS budget |

**3) Are you aware of the “Winter Warm” campaign organised by Kensington and Chelsea Foundation?**

Yes/No

**4) If yes, have you yourself, or someone you know participated in it?**

Yes/No

**5) Are you aware of the “Healthy Homes” partnership organised by local council, the NHS, and other charities?**

Yes/No

**6) If yes, have you yourself, or someone you know participated in it?**

Yes/No

**7) How effective do you think such schemes are in helping people with difficulty paying for heating in covering their bills? On a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being “Not Effective” and 5 being “Very Effective”.**

Not Effective		Neutral		Very Effective
1	2	3	4	5

**Semi-structured interview conducted:**

**High level representative of National Age UK; 06/06/2016 3:00 pm**

Interview:

Describe your role?

How do you wish to reform policy?

How important is community engagement to your campaign?

How far can Age UK help?

Can Age UK support community identification across the UK?

**Representative of Nucleus Legal Centre; 06/06/2016 11:00 am**

Interview Questions:

What is your specific role with Nucleus Legal Centre and the Winter Warmth campaign?

Do you see any underlying similarities between people who are in need of assistance but are not receiving governmental support?

What are the main challenges you face in your ability to assist the fuel poor?

Do you feel that you have sufficient resource needed to meet the needs of the fuel poor in your community?

Do you have any opinions on the government's effort to target the fuel poor?

Is the vulnerable more open to your organization compared to government officials?

Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

**Case Worker for Nucleus Legal centre; 08/06/2016 10:00 am**

Interview Questions:

What is your specific role with Nucleus Legal Centre and the Winter Warmth campaign?

Do you see any underlying similarities between people who are in need of assistance but are not receiving governmental support?

What are the main challenges you face in your ability to assist the fuel poor?

Do you feel that you have sufficient resource needed to meet the needs of the fuel poor in your community?

Do you have any opinions on the government's effort to target the fuel poor?

Is the vulnerable more open to your organization compared to government officials?

Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

### **Primary care navigator; 07/06/2016 4:00 pm**

Describe the role that your department plays with regards to identifying the fuel poor?

When you approach these people, and offer your services, are those people very open because you're from Age UK and such?

Have the people you do identify and offered your services, have they been involved with Age UK before or is it kind off their first instance?

### **London Fuel Poverty Hub representative; 06.06/2015 1:00 pm**

Interview Question:

1. In your experience, are there sufficient NGOs in local communities to identify fuel poor across the UK?
  - 1.1 Would some regions struggle with this approach?
2. What methods do you find are most effective in identifying the fuel poor?
3. We were interested in your research on community energy shops.
  - 3.1 How do you see energy shops introducing themselves as a trusted and integral part of local communities?
  - 3.2 How important do you find the above within the topic of targeting fuel poor?
4. How do you see community engagement best complimenting national policy?
  - 4.1 Should local NGOs simply spread awareness of available policies or have more control over the allocation of funding and policy?