

Being Warm Being Happy

The Being Warm Being Happy (BWBH) project is a mixed methods study of fuel poverty experienced by adults with a learning disability (AWLD) in England. The project aimed to generate an understanding of why AWLD may be at risk of fuel poverty, examine rates of fuel poverty in households in which AWLD reside and develop recommendations and potential solutions to challenges and the problems identified.

Background

There is a large body of evidence on the extent of fuel poverty, sometimes identified as part of a wider phenomenon of “energy vulnerability” or “energy poverty”. Living in a cold home is associated with premature death and a wide range of mental and physical illnesses. However, there is very little evidence of the nature and extent of fuel poverty in the disabled population, and virtually none at all for people with a learning disability. This is despite the fact that people with a learning disability are at a greater risk of material deprivation than the non-learning disabled population, and thus more likely to find it especially difficult to avoid living in a cold home. No research to date has examined the Fuel poverty experience and influences for AWLD. This project aimed to start to address this evidence gap. It is a participatory project where University academics worked with AWLD from a self-advocacy organisation.

Aim

BWBH is an exploratory study that aimed to understand and characterise the energy vulnerability from the perspective of people with a learning disability.



Methods

This exploratory mixed-method study adopted a co-researcher model where people with learning disabilities were members of the research team. BWBH was also underpinned by co-production.

Phase 1.

Analysis of two national surveys were conducted the Understanding Society (US) Survey 2014-2015 and the English Housing Survey (EHS) 2013. The prevalence of fuel poverty was estimated in households in England in which someone with a learning disability lives relative to adults with other forms of disability reside and the general adult population.

Phase 2.

A household study comprising interviews and temperature measurements was conducted in 10 households with an AWLD. A contextual analysis of deprivation indicators of the households was conducted.

Phase 3.

Two co-production workshops were held in a community venue in October 2018. Seventeen people from various stakeholder groups participated across the two workshops. A design challenge was also conducted with students from Sheffield Hallam University to

develop research ideas based on suggestions raised in the workshops.

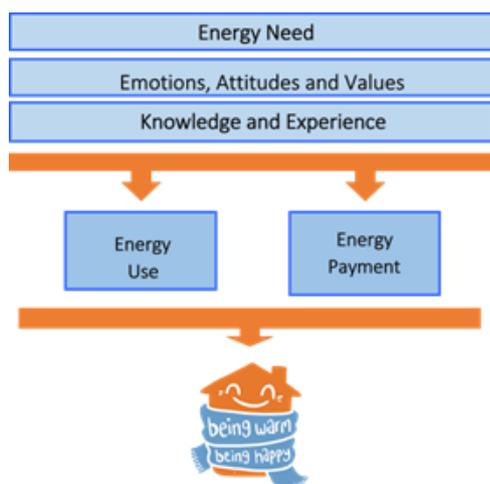
Key Findings

Phase 1.

- People with a learning disability living in private households are significantly more exposed to fuel poverty than their peers with other forms of disability, and the population of England as a whole. This result holds for both the US data and EHS data (using the Low Income High Costs (LIHC) fuel poverty metric).
- The set of *relative* rates of fuel poverty across five forms of disability (including learning disability) revealed by the US metric closely matches that revealed by the LIHC metric.
- The exposure of people with a learning disability to fuel poverty is significantly greater when measured by the LIHC rate than by the US rate.

Phase 2

The household study developed unique understanding of the experience of fuel poverty and home heating from the perspective of AWLD. Three interrelated themes were identified: energy need; emotions, attitudes and values; and knowledge and experience.



The findings indicated that:

- Occupancy and characteristics of those sharing a home influenced energy need and use. For example, if the home was shared with others, their views on heating had to be considered.
- Those with health problems or additional disability, knew they needed to keep warm in order to maintain their health.
- Being able to keep warm at home was a cause of worry and anxiety for the participants, mainly because of cost. Roll out of Universal Credit, alongside other benefit changes (actual or threatened) aggravated existing financial worry.
- To manage this anxiety, and try and maintain control, people adopted a range of strategies including manually operating the heating, making trade-offs between fuel and other household expenses, paying by pre-payment meter, and restricting heating use.



- These strategies sometimes led to participants paying more for fuel because of their tariff or less efficient use of energy or suffered hardship such as being cold at home, or hungry.
- Approaches were adopted to stay warm without relying on heating systems e.g. hot drinks, limiting the use of appliances and being mindful of energy efficiency.

- Having family who could help with advice or advocacy was a key facilitator, as was access to an advocacy group such as Speakup.
- For most participant's, prepayment energy meters offered a sense of control over finances that direct debit payments did not. People with sight and mobility problems experienced problems accessing the pre-payment meters.
- There was confusion about the role of smart meters; however, some participants were able to recognise the potential value of these.

Phase 3.

The co-production workshops and student designs identified a range of potential solutions. These were depicted graphically using personae, storyboards and design summaries (see full report). Solutions proposed included improved communication, development of training, raised awareness of fuel companies' Priority Service Registers (PSR), ensuring services are integrated across sectors, training of staff in energy efficiency and energy payment systems. Innovative technological solutions were also proposed.

Recommendations for practice

- Raise awareness of the PSR amongst AWLD, but also advocacy organisations. Fuel companies have a responsibility to be proactive in making this happen.
- Develop accessible co-ordinated information and support that works across services and organisations. Easy read, accessible written information and energy bills were identified as a priority.
- There is a need to co-produce telephone and web-based advice systems that work for AWLD. However, reliance on web-based resources alone is not recommended as that would exclude some AWLD.
- Train services providers who help AWLD keep warm at home to enable them to effectively assess and respond to risk.

There is potential for energy companies and other service providers to work in partnership with advocacy organisations to enable such training to be developed and delivered.

- Improvements are required to the user interface of smart meters and pre-payment meters. For example having a smart meter that spoke to you or had an easier to understand display. Energy companies can provide better advice and information on how to use them. Again, such interventions could be co-produced in partnership with AWLD and advocacy organisations.
- Further explore the potential of technological interventions including app based systems that provide accessible information and notifications about energy use and cost.
- New interventions should be implemented across sectors, to promote consistency of advice and streamlining of referral.

Recommendations for policy

- Government should monitor the impact of the Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payments on the ability of AWLD to afford to maintain an adequate standard of living and avoid fuel poverty.
- Fuel poverty and energy efficiency interventions should be reviewed to make sure they do not inadvertently increase existing inequalities by disproportionately benefitting less disadvantaged. Review should occur before implementation.
- For new information resources and technological interventions to be implemented across sectors, to promote consistency of advice and streamlining of referral (for example an information pack distributed by energy companies, tenancy agencies, advocacy groups and local

government. See Joanna and Tom Appendix 8).

Recommendations for research

This study begins to provide understanding of factors influencing the experiences of AWLD regarding fuel poverty and cold homes. It is just a start. Further research is required to:

- Test the generalisability of the qualitative findings amongst a larger population of AWLD.
- Develop evidence based interventions to improve the thermal comfort of AWLD.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of these interventions.

Conclusion

BWBH has generated initial insight into the prevalence of fuel poverty risk and the extent and impact of fuel poverty experience amongst adults with a learning disability. It provides valuable understanding of the real world challenges faced by AWLD in today's society and the resourcefulness and resilience of many AWLD. However it also identifies the extent to which the existing energy system puts them at a disadvantage.

Existing policy often refers to people with disabilities as 'vulnerable' to fuel poverty, but fails to recognise the heterogeneity of disabled populations and the complex range of factors that conspire against them being able to keep warm at home. The BWBH study illustrates how policy based interventions, such as energy pricing and the roll out of smart meters, may make existing inequalities worse for AWLD.

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The Being Warm Being Happy research team.

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Project report

The full project report can be downloaded at: <https://www.eagacharitabletrust.org/warm-happy-understanding-disability-fuel-poverty-energy-vulnerability-adults-learning-disability-awld/>

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