

LIGHTS OFF TO LIGHTS ON

Wise Group Insight Report - Fuel Poverty
November 2021

w i s e g r o u p



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INTRODUCTION

The twenty-sixth Conference of the Parties (COP26) took place in Glasgow in November 2021 with the objective of adopting an international response to climate change. This paper aims to draw on the Wise Group's unique insight into some of society's most significant social and economic challenges.

Understanding if COP26 delivered for the most vulnerable in society is important. Although international ambitions are to amplify the voices, concerns, and priorities of vulnerable groups, those most impacted by climate change, this paper seeks to demonstrate the gap between living from 'hand to mouth' and the consequential barriers faced in the ability to contribute to net zero.

Examining the relationship between poverty and climate change is not easy, and multifaceted. In part, many do not realise they are experiencing fuel poverty or understand how climate change priorities link to their everyday lives. With many energy providers committing to Energy UK's Vulnerability Commitment, the results of this report can also help direct engagement with this group of difficult to reach customers who are at times invisible to conventional monitoring due to self-disconnection.

The good news is that mentoring interventions leading to sustainable change and the ability to take control of household energy are having positive results. We firstly undertook a participatory consultation exercise '*Reality Check*' with a section of our customers in Greater Glasgow and Tyne and Wear looking at the gap between their living reality and ability to contribute to net zero. Secondly, we undertook a desktop evaluation examining customer fuel poverty journeys and experiences from our mentors in '*Shining a light on vulnerability*'. Our evidence base, summarised below, can contribute to helping policy makers and others to advance the aspirations set out in energy policy linking the COP26 ambitions and the voices, concerns, and priorities of vulnerable groups.

KEY FINDINGS

A considerable proportion of respondents rationed or disconnected their heating and electricity, with 24% doing so in Greater Glasgow and 42% in North East England. The discrepancy in these figures may be accounted for by the difference in knowledge of support schemes, with 13% of respondents in City of Glasgow having no knowledge of services compared to 66% in North East England.

Of those respondents who ration or disconnect their electricity and heating, 75.4% do so at least every week in Greater Glasgow and 56.3% do so at least once a week in North East England. Electric heating, among the most expensive heating methods, was used in the majority of respondents' homes, equating to 54.1% in Greater Glasgow. This figure is considerably above the national average of c.4%, and excludes this population from initiatives regarding the replacement of gas boilers.

Over 90% of those surveyed recycled for environmental reasons, though 66.9% of respondents said they would not consider buying an electric vehicle, installing solar panels, or installing more

energy efficient heating. The overwhelming reason for this was financial exclusion, with many respondents stating they would like to engage in these initiatives should sufficient financial support be available.

A considerable difference was found between Greater Glasgow and North East England regarding understanding of net zero, with 72.4% of City of Glasgow respondents aware compared to 7.9% of North East England respondents being aware. This may be partly attributed to COP26 preparations.

Overall, 90.9% of respondents rated Wise Group mentoring as excellent, with many regarding it as a “vital service”. This resulted in sustainable behavioural change with 83.9% of respondents reporting they would now be confident or very confident in seeking help with energy issues independently.

BEYOND STATISTICS

This report further stands out in capturing the human reality of fuel poverty. In the survey, individuals were asked to describe in a word how they felt when rationing or disconnecting their energy. Responses included: cold, scared, miserable, unhappy, embarrassed, worried, upset, damp, helpless, sore, horrified, stiff. Personal stories were also gathered, with one person, who has a disability, commenting that: *“I thought I was one of the forgotten people in my town, help was always there, but for some”*. Another said, *“There are times when I open my energy bill and cry”*.

Colleagues were also asked for comments. One colleague recounted: “I was dealing with a lady, she’s 75 years old, with cancer. She’s got the incorrect meter type and since last winter she never used her heating at all. She took a hot water bottle about with a blanket because she was too scared”. This was the result of issues arising from an incorrect meter type, an issue which was unresolved for two years.

It was also reported that fuel poverty has forced a rethink of strategy in some food banks as some of those in need were unable to cook food due to lack of energy. This has resulted in “ambient” food parcels being made up of food which do not require heating up and have long shelf lives. As can be seen from these examples, the ramifications from rationing and disconnecting energy go far beyond the immediate issue.

A positive story also emerged from the qualitative responses. Following engagement with Wise Group mentors, several customers were able to take control of their energy in a sustainable way. One carer who was successfully supported in applying for financial support said: *“I wouldn’t have been able to get my gas back on without it”*. An elderly couple who was being pursued by debt collectors over incorrect meter readings reported: *“We have never owed a penny in our lives, and to get to this age and be sent letters from debt collectors has affected us enormously. From the minute you took this over, we have been able to sleep better at night”*.

Overall, in 2020/21, the Wise Group provided support to 48,000 people, positively impacting their extended family, friends and communities.

SHINING A LIGHT ON VULNERABILITY

Households on the doorstep of COP26 are disconnecting themselves from electricity and heating to make ends meet, removing themselves from existing systems to track and assist 'in debt' vulnerable customers. The majority of these individuals are aware and supportive of environmental initiatives but feel left behind by the financial costs involved. Those most vulnerable to fuel poverty are disproportionately saddled with the most expensive heating methods. When energy needs are not met, individuals, families and friends are facing social, financial, physical and mental harm.

Nevertheless, the disconnected can be reconnected. Through mentoring, individuals are being pulled out of fuel poverty and given the chance to take control of their energy future. As this study has shown, where awareness and support are increased, risk of disconnection and rationing have been reduced, and the root causes of fuel poverty can begin to be addressed.

Below we explain our process and findings in more detail. We conclude by setting out the implications for the policy and business communities.

PART I – A REALITY CHECK

THE PROCESS

A participatory consultation shown in Appendix 2 was carried out with Wise Group customers from the Greater Glasgow area, including the City of Glasgow, South Lanarkshire and North Lanarkshire. North Lanarkshire borders the northeast of the City of Glasgow and contains many of Glasgow's suburbs and commuter towns and villages. This area has the smallest response rate; however, responses are included in the research to provide a suburban perspective. South Lanarkshire borders the southeast of the City of Glasgow and contains some of Greater Glasgow's suburbs. It also contains many agricultural towns and villages. This area has the largest response rate. These areas have been used as they have within them parts of the Glasgow metro area as well as satellite communities heavily dependent upon the city. Survey responses can be seen in Appendix 3, and analysis in Appendix 4.

A total of 325 valid responses were received from the participatory consultation detailed in the table below.

	NUMBER	%
SOUTH LANARKSHIRE	218	65.9
GLASGOW CITY	76	23
NORTH LANARKSHIRE	23	6.9
ANONYMOUS	6	1.8
INVERCLYDE	2	0.6
PERTH AND KINROSS	2	0.6
WEST LOTHIAN	2	0.6
MIDLOTHIAN	1	0.3
WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE	1	0.3
TOTAL	325	100

As the numbers are minimal in Inverclyde, Midlothian, Perth and Kinross, West Dunbartonshire and West Lothian (7), these areas are omitted from the study as they cannot be held to represent their local geographies.

SCOTTISH INDEX OF MULTIPLE DEPRIVATION

The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) is a tool for identifying the places in Scotland where people are experiencing disadvantage across different aspects of their lives. Appendix 5 shows local authority performance ordered by the percentage of their zones included in the most deprived 20% in Scotland. Inverclyde (44.7%) is the local authority with the highest percentage of deprived zones with City of Glasgow (44.3%) a close second, North Lanarkshire 6th (34.7%) and South Lanarkshire ranks tenth (20.42%). All are in the top 30% most deprived areas in Scotland.

This SIMD data is considered to establish any correlation between income and employment deprivation and behaviours regarding rationing energy, knowledge of support available, and knowledge of - and ability to contribute to - the net zero agenda. In this research we are using vigintiles which split the data zones into 20 groups, each containing 5% of Scotland's data zones. Data zones are ranked to identify the most to least deprived areas, the higher the rank, the more deprived the area. Appendix 6 shows the details for all respondents in the consultation.

When analysing the findings of the survey, each address is allocated its SIMD/IMD data by the respondents' postcode to try to demonstrate information more accurately, however the small size of the data zones may not always be accurate to the individual. Findings are not intended to be generalisable to the whole population. However, there is an assumption that themes and issues that affect respondents are likely to reflect wider concerns.

ENGLISH INDEX OF MULTIPLE DEPRIVATION

A further participatory consultation found in Appendix 7 was carried out with customers from Tyne and Wear in North East England. Tyne and Wear covers the council areas of Newcastle, North Tyneside, South Tyneside, Gateshead and Sunderland.

A total of 38 surveys were completed in North East England. Survey responses can be seen in Appendix 8, and analysis in Appendix 9. As the number of responses are small, the results are not broken down into smaller geographical areas as in Scotland. Some of the questions in the survey are slightly different to those asked to customers in Scotland to reflect national variations. Comparisons are made to the survey responses in Scotland, where questions are the same, however the smaller sample size in Tyne and Wear should be taken into consideration.

A breakdown of the geographies for the Tyne and Wear responses as follows:

COUNCIL AREA	NUMBER OF RESPONSES
NEWCASTLE CITY	25
SUNDERLAND CITY	10
SOUTH TYNESIDE	2

There are 317 local authorities in the English Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). Newcastle ranks 74th most deprived. South Tyneside ranks 13 and Sunderland ranks 24, and as such all sit at the top end of the rankings.

THE INSIGHT

THE CHALLENGE OF ELECTRIC HEATING

Electric heating is 3-4 times more expensive than gas heating. One unit of mains gas (measured in kWh) costs around 4p/kWh. Conversely, one unit of electricity from the mains (also measured in kWh) will cost about 15p/kWh. Customers from Greater Glasgow show that overall, electric heating was the main source (54.1%) followed by a mix of electric and gas (32%) and gas (8%). *From the experiences of our mentors, it is likely that those stating they use both gas and electric heating are supplementing their gas central heating with the use of portable electrical heaters, which increases their energy costs.*

A breakdown by area is below.

	GLASGOW	NORTH LANARKSHIRE	SOUTH LANARKSHIRE
ELECTRIC	10.5%	0%	77.5%
GAS	6.6%	95.7%	6.4%
GAS/ELECTRIC	82.9%	4.3%	16.1%

There are noticeable differences between the council areas. Of the 76 respondents in City of Glasgow, 82.9% have both gas and electric heating. Of the 23 respondents in North Lanarkshire, 95.7% have solely gas heating, and in South Lanarkshire of the 218 respondents, 77.5% have solely electric heating. There were no respondents using solid fuel, oil/LPG or communal/district heating.

In Tyne and Wear the most common heating type is gas. This differs to the findings in Greater Glasgow, where the majority of heating type across all areas is solely electric.

	TYNE AND WEAR
ELECTRIC	8%
GAS	61%
GAS/ELECTRIC	34%

With electric the method of heating in just 4% of UK households, in both Greater Glasgow and North East England our respondents were disproportionately using this expensive heating method. This may be a factor in driving some of these households into fuel poverty. Furthermore, this means many who are currently facing fuel poverty will not be included in the current drive to replace gas and gas/electric boilers with heat pumps, reducing their ability to take advantage of financial support to combat climate change.

THE SMART METER

Smart meters are a next generation meter for both gas and electricity. They are a replacement for standard meters, which require people to track their own meter readings and submit them

to their supplier to ensure accurate bills. Smart meters work by using a secure national communication network (called the DCC) to send the customers' actual energy usage automatically and wirelessly to their supplier. If people have a smart meter, they do not need to rely on estimated energy bills or provide their own regular readings. Whilst smart meters have these advantages there are also disadvantages, the main downside being that certain types can lose smart functionality when people switch away from the supplier that installed them which can cause major issues. For this reason, we have asked what type of meter customers have.

37.2% of respondents from the Greater Glasgow area have a smart meter, 65.5% do not have one and 2.8% are waiting for one to be installed.

The following table shows responses by area.

	GLASGOW	NORTH LANARKSHIRE	SOUTH LANARKSHIRE
YES	39.5%	35.2%	35.5%
NO	52.6%	30.4%	65.6%
AWAITING ONE	7.9%	4.3%	0.9%

	TYNE AND WEAR
SMART METER	50%
STANDARD METER	50%

Our findings suggest that there is an even 50% split between smart meters and standard meters in Tyne and Wear.

These figures are broadly reflective of the national average for adoption of smart meters, which currently stands at approximately 40% of households. It is worth noting that a high number of respondents are awaiting a smart meter, suggesting a delay in delivery. This delay can lead to problems with tracking usage, and in cases places individuals into 'debt-mode', leading to disconnecting or rationing from households for fear of facing a large bill later. Relevant case studies are to be found in Part II of this report.

PAYING FOR ENERGY

There are several ways people can pay for their energy, and the selected budget method will impact the unit price.

The most common and often the most effective method is via monthly or quarterly direct debit. It is important that the payment reflects the energy usage, ensuring that there is no underpayment at the point of billing. If people underpay, they build up a debt on their account, which could result in the provider increasing monthly payments to bridge the deficit. If debt reaches a certain amount, the provider may stop people from switching supplier until the outstanding sum has been repaid.

Payment cards work by giving people more control over the payments they make – as opposed to direct debits, where the money is taken automatically. Customers top up the payment card, either at a PayPoint or the Post Office, and make payments in advance so they can spread the cost of their next bill. However, when they get their bill, any remaining balance needs to be cleared by the following bill.

Other methods include pre-payment meters through which consumers pay up front for their gas and electricity, and whenever they use energy, the cost is taken from the balance on their pre-payment meter. This is a unique way to pay because people buy energy in units before they use it and means they know exactly how much energy is available or when it is going to run out. However, pre-payment meters are usually more expensive per unit of energy than most other tariffs; they could run out of credit at inconvenient times or when people do not have the funds to top up and once someone gets to the end of their current credit allowance, their energy is shut off until they can purchase more.

Fuel Direct is a government scheme, also known as Third Party Deductions, which allows consumers to use their benefits to repay any debt they have on their energy account.

Finally, some consumers still pay their quarterly bill by cash or cheque on receipt.

A comparison of payment methods is broken down below.

Overall, 61% of respondents in Greater Glasgow pay by Direct Debit/standing order, 37.2% pre-payment meter, 4.4% quarterly bill and 1.6% weekly/monthly payment card.

	GLASGOW	NORTH LANARKSHIRE	SOUTH LANARKSHIRE
DIRECT DEBIT/ STANDING ORDER	51.3%	34.8%	61%
PRE-PAYMENT METER	40.8%	65.2%	3.3%
QUARTERLY BILL	6.6%	0%	4.1%
PAYMENT CARD	1.3%	0%	1.8%

In terms of deprivation in relation to all areas in Scotland, 53.8% of respondents in the top 20% most deprived areas pay by pre-payment meter, followed by 41% paying via Direct Debit/Standing Order. Only 4.3% of all respondents pay by quarterly bill. In the least deprived areas, the main method of payment is by Direct Debit/Standing Order with 69% using this method.

These findings demonstrate that most customers in the areas of greatest deprivation are paying for their energy using pre-payment meters, the second most common payment method is Direct Debit/Standing order, and those in the least deprived areas are most commonly paying by Direct Debit/Standing Order. Very few people pay by quarterly bill, and none pay by Fuel Direct.

	TYNE AND WEAR
DIRECT DEBIT/ STANDING ORDER	47.4%
PRE-PAYMENT METER	15.8%
QUARTERLY BILL	2.6%
PAYMENT CARD	31.6%
FUEL DIRECT	2.6%

The most common payment methods for respondents in Tyne and Wear are also Direct Debit/Standing Order followed by payment card. Pre-payment meters were much less widely reported than in Glasgow.

83% of respondents who pay by pre-payment meter, 75% of those paying by payment card and 61.1% paying by Direct Debit are in the top 20% most deprived areas. One respondent pays by quarterly bill and one by fuel card.

From these findings, we can observe that pre-payment meters are disproportionately common in the most deprived areas among our respondents. Accounting for case studies in Part II, it can be said that these meters, which leave little breathing room for variation in seasonal expenditure, can encourage individuals and households to ration or self-disconnect their energy supply between payments of salary, pension or Universal Credit.

RATIONING AND DISCONNECTING ENERGY TO HELP TOWARDS CLIMATE CHANGE

Responses from the survey found that most respondents in Greater Glasgow do not turn off or ration their heating to save energy and help towards climate change. Overall, 98.2% of respondents said no, and 1.8% said yes.

	GLASGOW	NORTH LANARKSHIRE	SOUTH LANARKSHIRE
YES	1.3%%	0%	1.8%
NO	98.6%	100%	98.2%

	TYNE AND WEAR
YES	15.8%
NO	84.2%

84.2% of respondents in Tyne and Wear do not turn off or ration their heating and electricity due to climate change and 15.7% do.

The findings may not be an indicator that people are not interested in climate change, rather, that they are more influenced by other factors or are unable to engage in certain climate-orientated activities for financial reasons. Many people find themselves trying to maintain the heating of their homes, and feeding themselves and their families, some with associated mental health issues of living on low incomes, and in some cases from hand to mouth. These situations often prevent people from believing that they can contribute to improving energy consumption. These findings are supported in the case studies detailed Appendices 9 and 10.

RATIONING AND DISCONNECTING ENERGY FOR FINANCIAL REASONS

Self-disconnection or turning off occurs when customers go off supply because the credit on the meter has been exhausted or the customer cannot access funds. There are growing concerns about the number of pre-payment meter customers self-disconnecting each year and the very negative impacts that this can have on households, particularly those in vulnerable circumstances.

Ofgem's consultation on self-rationing and disconnection 2020 reported 4.3 million and 3.4 million electricity and gas pre-payment consumers self-disconnecting from their energy supply. There are concerns about the number of customers self-disconnecting each year and the

significant negative impacts this can have on customers, particularly those in vulnerable circumstances.

Following the consultation, Ofgem decided to proceed with the introduction of a new requirement on suppliers to identify all pre-payment meter customers who are self-disconnecting and to offer appropriate support, giving due consideration to customers in vulnerable situations. The new requirements will apply to both traditional and smart meter pre-payment meter customers and require that self-disconnection should be identified on an ongoing and continuous basis. Ofgem recognise the technical challenges with identification of self-disconnection on traditional meters, but they expect suppliers to take all reasonable steps to achieve this requirement. An example of this can be seen in case study number 6, Appendix 12.

Overall, almost a quarter (24%) of respondents in Greater Glasgow state that they do ration or turn off their heating and electricity due to fear that bills will be too high, or credit may run out. Of these 45% (118) of respondents have pre-payment meters and 46% (54) of these do ration or turn off their energy. 59% (32) do so every week and (16.9%) every day. This correlates with Ofgem's findings detailed in the paragraph above.

Responses by area are detailed below.

	GLASGOW	NORTH LANARKSHIRE	SOUTH LANARKSHIRE
YES	26.3%	100%	15.1%
NO	73.7%	0%	84.9%

It is interesting to note that in all areas of those who do ration or turn off their energy 56.6% do not live in the top 20% most deprived areas in Scotland. 34% of respondents reside in the second rank of deprivation, 14% in the third rank of deprivation, and 6.6% in the fourth and 1.3% the fifth rank of deprivation.

	GLASGOW	NORTH LANARKSHIRE	SOUTH LANARKSHIRE
1: 1-20%	65%	26.1%	42.4%
2: 21-40%	30%	56.5%	21.2%
3: 41-60%	5%	4.3%	27.3%
4: 61-80%	0%	8.7%	9.1%
5: 81-100%	0%	4.3%	0%

In the SIMD and IMD the employment domain considers the percentage of working age people who are employment deprived and in receipt of certain benefits. The income domain identifies areas where there are concentrations of individuals and families living on low incomes.

Examining the respondents who are rationing or turning off their energy found that many of those in the second and lower ranks of deprivation do not rank highly in income deprivation. This demonstrates that those who are rationing or turning off their heating are not necessarily on the lowest incomes.

As there are other respondents who ration or turn off their heating in the less deprived areas this suggests that they are not necessarily on the lowest incomes.

TYNE AND WEAR	
YES	42%
NO	58%

42% of respondents stated that they do turn off or ration their energy due to fear their bills will be too high or that their credit might run out. Of these, 81.3% live within the top 20% most deprived areas in England. In terms of income and employment deprivation, 81.3% rank highly in income deprivation and 87.5% in employment deprivation.

This suggests that the majority of respondents in Tyne and Wear who are turning off their energy are in the most deprived areas. However, the sample size needs to be taken into consideration.

From this, we say with confidence that self-disconnecting and rationing is occurring in communities of affluence, possibly among groups such as the elderly and those who have lost their income, entailing that support must be targeted at an individual level rather than simply by postcode. These findings also reinforce the correlation between electric heating and fuel poverty, with those using electric heating considerably more likely than other groups to ration or self-disconnect energy in Greater Glasgow. Further investigation is required to establish if electric heating is a cause of fuel poverty, or a symptom of the circumstances leading to fuel poverty.

Furthermore, it should cautiously be noted that the 24% of respondents reporting self-disconnection or rationing of energy bears a close semblance to the Scottish Government estimate of 25% of households experiencing fuel poverty. While we cannot claim that the results of this survey mirror the broader population of those who live in fuel poverty due to the restricted sample, it may still shed light on the experience within this population.

Additional comments were received from some respondents regarding the costs of energy and their concerns. All comments can be found in Appendix 3.

FREQUENCY OF RATIONING OR TURNING OFF HEATING

Overall, 75.4% of respondents in Greater Glasgow who turn off or ration their heating and electricity do so regularly as they are afraid their bills will be too high or the credit on their meter may run out. 15.1% do so every day while 60.3% do so every week. The following table shows detail by area.

	GLASGOW	NORTH LANARKSHIRE	SOUTH LANARKSHIRE
1 – ONCE A YEAR	5.6%	0%	12.5%
2 – EVERY FEW MONTHS	0%	8.7%	3.1%
3 – EVERY MONTH	0%	8.7%	25%
4 – EVERY WEEK	83.3%	47.8%	56.3%
5 – EVERY DAY	11.1%	34.8%	3.1%

A high proportion of those respondents who ration or turn off their heating in Glasgow do so every week; in North Lanarkshire the majority do so both every week and every day, and South Lanarkshire, every week. This is concerning and poses the question whether these people are being identified as vulnerable by suppliers and authorities.

Additional comments were provided by respondents and mentors regarding turning off and rationing heating:

“Customer worries there may be a day where she cannot pay for her electricity consumption”

“Find it really hard to keep prepayment meter filled, sometimes it’s food or energy”

“Customer went into self-disconnect with his gas, because he owes money to a money lender”

“Customer says she know a lot of her neighbours are turning off their heating also or waiting longer each year to put heating back on as the bad weather starts to hit. Customer runs a local group with her neighbours, and this has been openly discussed”

“Customer is seriously ill and in and out of hospital, but he has to regulate his money between heating and eating”

“Customer states she is on benefits, and she cannot survive on the money she gets to keep the heating and cooking on”

Similarly, in Tyne and Wear a high proportion of respondents (56.3%) are rationing or turning of their heating and electricity regularly, 31.3% every week and 25% every day.

TYNE AND WEAR	
1 – ONCE A YEAR	6.3%
2 – EVERY FEW MONTHS	18.8%
3 – EVERY MONTH	18.8%
4 – EVERY WEEK	31.3%
5 – EVERY DAY	25%

Such findings reveal that self-disconnection or rationing of energy has become habitual for many households and is not exclusively practiced in the run up to payday/benefit/pension receipt or occurring only in energy intensive periods such as winter. With the survey having taken place in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals and households are likely to have been spending a greater amount of time in the home – leading to higher energy consumption – or may have experienced an income reduction, leading to the necessity to ration or self-disconnect more regularly. As we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential that this habitual reliance on rationing and self-disconnection is broken to safeguard the social, physical and mental wellbeing of individuals.

HOW IT FEELS TO RATION OR DISCONNECT HEATING OR ELECTRICITY

The negative impacts of self-disconnection and rationing are well documented. Ofgem carried out some research in 2020 which highlighted the significant physical and emotional impacts that self-disconnection and self-rationing can have on customers, with higher detriment experienced by those who are self-disconnecting or rationing regularly or for longer periods.

The survey asked respondents to give two words to express how having to ration or turn off energy made them feel. The following word clouds illustrate respondents' feelings. Full comments can be seen in Appendix 11.

[illegible]

WORRIED

COLD

ANGRY

SAD

FRIGHTENED

Scared

VULNERABLE

DEPRESSED

MISERABLE

ANNOYING

avoid

tends

FORGOTTEN

UPSET

Skint

Broke

customer

monitor

heating

high

costs

WordItOut

Key words that stand out in the feedback include:

Cold, scared, miserable, unhappy, embarrassed, worried, upset, damp, helpless, sore, horrified, stiff.

These words help capture the physical (cold, damp, sore, stiff), mental (scared, miserable, unhappy, worried, upset, horrified), social (embarrassed, helpless) and financial (broke, skint, job) implications of fuel poverty. Nevertheless, none of these categories are mutually exclusive, e.g. feeling damp and sore may decrease your ability to perform a job, leading to financial hardship causing embarrassment and ultimately leading to a miserable state of mind. It can therefore be seen how support for energy costs not only benefits the individual and their family and friends, but also society in allowing the individual to engage with public life more fully.

Full responses are detailed in Appendix 11 and demonstrate that respondents are frightened, scared and embarrassed, and that health conditions are exacerbated. This reaffirms the statements by Ofgem, above.

AWARENESS OF ELIGIBILITY DEPENDENT ENERGY SUPPORT

As a number of customers are on low income or unemployed and in receipt of benefits, we asked whether they were aware of the following support that they may be entitled to.

- **Warm Home Discount:** £140 towards energy billing – annual application required
- **Priority Services Register:** The PSR service can help vulnerable households, including those in debt, through the provision of help and advice. It can also ensure you are on the lowest cost tariff and can provide external sources of helping the elderly, deaf, visually impaired, ill or disabled
- **Warmer Homes Scotland:** Scottish Government funded support worth on average £5,000 for energy efficiency measures (this question was omitted from the Tyne and Wear survey)
- **Charis/hardship funding support:** Vulnerable households can apply for financial assistance and subsidised grants to pay a bill that is in arrears

	GLASGOW	NORTH LANARKSHIRE	SOUTH LANARKSHIRE
WARM HOME DISCOUNT	70.1%	13%	78.9%
PRIORITY SERVICES REGISTER	71.4%	91.3%	84.9%
WARMER HOMES SCOTLAND	26%	13%	3.2%
CHARIS	6.5%	0%	11.5%
NONE	13%	8.7%	19.7%

Overall, the most well-known services in Greater Glasgow are the Warm Home Discount (76.6%) and the Priority Services Register (76.6%). Very few respondents knew of Warmer Homes Scotland (9.5%) or Charis (5%), and 17.4% did not know of any of the services.

In Glasgow and South Lanarkshire, the responses were similar, however North Lanarkshire differed. Knowledge of the Priority Services Register was low (13%), Warmer Homes Discount was very high (91.3%), Warm Homes Scotland was very low (3.2%), Charis was on par with other

areas (5%) and 19.7% did not know of any of these services. These figures may be due to the sample size.

	TYNE AND WEAR
WARMER HOMES DISCOUNT	28.9%
PRIORITY SERVICES REGISTER	5.3%
CHARIS	5.3%
NONE	65.8%

It is evident that there is less awareness of initiatives to help consumers who are struggling with their energy costs in Tyne and Wear. In the region energy advice services are limited. This would demonstrate that communities would benefit greatly from a dedicated energy mentoring service.

REDUCING CARBON EMISSIONS

Research by Ofgem found that many people do not know what they can do as individuals to reduce carbon emissions or do not feel their actions will make a difference. Others have reservations about what they see as unproven technologies such as electric vehicles or heat pumps.

It must be recognised that not all consumers will be equally capable of playing a role in net zero. People's abilities to personally contribute towards reducing the carbon intensity of their energy usage will vary. For this reason, we asked customers what they currently do to contribute to a reduction in climate change and in the following question what things they would or could consider doing to improve their contribution. It can be argued that those people who ration or disconnect their energy are by default the greenest in society, though it is not by choice.

Overall, the most common contribution to climate change in Greater Glasgow was recycling waste (96.2%) followed by switching off appliances (73.8%). 20.2% of respondents walk instead of using a car, and 5.4% do none of these things. The following table shows findings by each area.

	GLASGOW	NORTH LANARKSHIRE	SOUTH LANARKSHIRE
RECYCLE	90.8%	60.9%	96.3%
WALK INSTEAD OF CAR	18.4%	30.4%	18.8%
TURN OFF APPLIANCES	64.5%	69.6%	72.5%
NONE	3.9%	26.1%	3.2%

Behaviours are similar in Glasgow and South Lanarkshire, however in North Lanarkshire, less respondents recycle and more walk rather than using a car.

TYNE AND WEAR

RECYCLE	38.8%
WALK INSTEAD OF CAR	22.4%
TURN OFF APPLIANCES	31.3%
NONE	7.5%

By a significant margin, respondents in Tyne and Wear are less likely to recycle their waste and turn off their appliances when not in use than those in Greater Glasgow. This may be attributable to there being limited energy advice services in the area, so knowledge of reducing carbon emissions may not be as prevalent.

Nevertheless, the overall rate of recycling reported across North East England is 38.8% whereas Greater Glasgow stands considerably above the current ONS estimate of 45.5% of UK households. This may indicate that those with issues regarding energy may be more interested in recycling than the general population, seeking to contribute where financial costs are low or absent in an action with no immediate individual advantage. Given the opportunity to contribute without having to make difficult financial choices, many in fuel poverty may engage with further environmental initiatives more so than the average citizen.

LOW CARBON HOUSEHOLD OPTIONS

Ofgem's findings state "many consumers are concerned about climate change and say they want to do their bit to help the environment. Many do not know what they can do as individuals to reduce carbon emissions or do not feel their actions will make a difference. They often talk about how they recycle but do not know what actions they can take to reduce their energy consumption and struggle to connect this with climate change. Others have reservations about what they see as unproven technologies such as electric vehicles or heat pumps. There are a host of actual and perceived barriers that may impede behaviour change at the pace that is needed. In part this is unsurprising because new low carbon technologies and services are in their infancy and many consumers may not be aware of the options. But we also know from our trials on consumer engagement with tariff switching that information alone is rarely sufficient to change behaviour".

There is a general awareness that making home energy efficiency improvements is a potential means of reducing fuel bills, however tenure can be a barrier in achieving this. Generally, people who are energy vulnerable have limited agency to reduce their own vulnerability because of structural and institutional factors such as housing providers and housing stock. Those living in poor quality dwellings with damp, cracks and draughts find it difficult to keep their homes warm. Those renting in the private rented sector in particular tended to hold the perception that they were not eligible for energy efficiency interventions due to not owning their home. Those in the social rented sector can feel they lack control over which energy efficient measures are installed to their homes.

Overall, 12.8% of respondents would/could consider putting a more energy efficient heating system into their homes in Greater Glasgow, 3.2% installing solar panels, 27.1% buying an electric car or bike and 66.9% none of these.

The following table shows findings by each area:

	GLASGOW	NORTH LANARKSHIRE	SOUTH LANARKSHIRE
INSTALLING MORE ENERGY EFFICIENT HEATING	40.8%	17.4%	1.4%
INSTALLING SOLAR PANELS	6.6%	17.4%	0.5%
BUYING AN ELECTRIC CAR OR BIKE	28.9%	21.7%	27.1%
NONE	53.1%	78.3%	71.1%

As stated, 66.9% of respondents would not consider any of the suggested options to help to reduce climate change.

Whilst 40.8% of respondents in Glasgow state they would consider installing a more energy efficient heating service, it should be noted that this is 40.8% of the 12% overall, so figures are not high.

As discussed, it is possible that tenure and costs play a part in the lack of respondents saying they could or would install heating or solar panels. In terms of costs, it seems schemes for reaching net zero (e.g. heat pumps, electric cars) are being designed in such a way to only make them attainable for homeowners with considerable disposable income. Respondents' comments related to these issues can be found in Appendix 3, a sample are detailed below:

"Customer would love more energy efficient measures fitted to his property, but he rents from a housing association"

"Customer wants to purchase an electric car, but cannot afford the prices, she feels the price needs to be government funded more"

"Customer has been put off solar panels by cost"

It may also be that, as stated above, new low carbon technologies and services are in their infancy and many consumers may not be aware of the options.

Increased numbers of respondents state they could/would consider an electric car or bike, but percentages are still low.

TYNE AND WEAR

INSTALLING MORE ENERGY EFFICIENT HEATING	21.1%
INSTALLING SOLAR PANELS	10.5%
BUYING AN ELECTRIC CAR OR BIKE	13.2%
NONE	35.8%

In Tyne and Wear 21% of respondents said they would/could consider installing a more energy efficient heating system, again, due to the response rate this figure is not a huge number. In both Scotland and North East England, this nonetheless suggests that customers would consider adopting such solutions, however it may be cost or lack of knowledge about different heating systems that have deterred them for doing so.

UNDERSTANDING OF NET ZERO

As COP26 was to take place in Glasgow, we wanted to gauge how many customers are aware of what net zero is.

Overall, only 11.4% of respondents in Greater Glasgow did not know what net zero is, 60.4% did know, and 19.2% were not sure. The following table shows findings by each area.

	GLASGOW	NORTH LANARKSHIRE	SOUTH LANARKSHIRE
YES	72.4%	0%	69.4%
NO	9.2%	47.8%	11.4%
NOT SURE	18.4%	52.2%	19.2%

There is quite an obvious disparity in responses from respondents in North Lanarkshire, this may well be due to the smaller response size.

	TYNE AND WEAR
YES	7.9%
NO	84.2%
NOT SURE	7.9%

Responses in Tyne and Wear were opposite to those in Greater Glasgow, as 84.2% do not know what net zero is.

The considerable difference between Greater Glasgow and North East England may be due to the emphasis placed on the preparation for COP26 in Glasgow, though this alone may not be the only reason. National and local government initiatives, as well as education programmes within schools are likely to have also contributed to the different figures. Awareness of net zero in Greater Glasgow may furthermore be a reason for increased uptake in recycling compared to North East England, and greater willingness to consider other environmental initiatives.

GREATER GLASGOW

To try to understand levels of interest in net zero, those respondents who did not know or where not sure what net zero is, were asked if they would like to know more about it.

97 respondents in total fell into this category and 90.7% said that they would not like to know more, only 5.2% were interested and the remaining 4.1% did not respond. Responses by area are detailed below.

	GLASGOW	NORTH LANARKSHIRE	SOUTH LANARKSHIRE
YES	19%	0%	1.9%
NO	81%	100%	88.9%
NO RESPONSE	0%		7.4%

TYNE AND WEAR

32 respondents fell into this category and 45.7% would like to find out more about what net zero is.

	TYNE AND WEAR
YES	54.2%
NO	45.7%

A considerable difference was found between Greater Glasgow and Tyne and Wear, which may be impacted by the comparatively low pre-existing knowledge of net zero in Tyne and Wear.

Consideration must also be given to the possibility that it is not always possible for some people to find the confidence or time to think about climate change alongside their substantial existing day-to-day demands, with many often living from hand to mouth.

THE IMPACT OF MENTORING

To establish the effectiveness of our energy support and advocacy services, we asked customers to rate how useful the mentoring had been to them. Overall, 90.9% of respondents rated the support as a 5 excellent, and 8.2% 4 (very good), 0.9% 3 (average).

Responses by area are detailed below.

	GLASGOW	NORTH LANARKSHIRE	SOUTH LANARKSHIRE
5 – EXCELLENT	82.9%	65.2%	96.8%
4 – VERY GOOD	8.2%	34.8%	2.3%
3 – AVERAGE	0.9%	0%	0.9%

This customer insight demonstrates that the energy mentoring services are almost universally perceived to be excellent or very good. Some additional comments from respondents regarding the service include:

“The help is faultless, very useful service and would recommend to a friend”

“Easy going and informative service which I found very useful, appreciate any help related to saving money and running home more efficiently”

“Customer thinks services like ours are vitally important to elderly and disabled people in Scotland”

All comments can be seen in Appendix 3.

Establishing control with household energy in many instances is determined by consumer confidence.

Most of our respondents report an increase in confidence to seek help following support from our mentoring services. Overall, 83.9% of respondents rated 4 – confident (20.9%) and 5 – extremely confident (63%).

	GLASGOW	NORTH LANARKSHIRE	SOUTH LANARKSHIRE
5 – VERY CONFIDENT	50.0%	4.3%	72.9%
4 – CONFIDENT	28.9%	4.3%	19.7%
3 – SOME CONFIDENCE	15.8%	64.5%	5.5%
2 – NOT CONFIDENT	3.5%	21.5%	1.8%
1 – NO CONFIDENCE AT ALL	0.6%	4.3%	0%

The large disparity in North Lanarkshire may be due to the small sample size. However, consultation with our mentors suggests that energy advice has taken a back seat during the pandemic as the main concerns of the majority of customers has been to secure support for energy payments and issues with debt and suppliers. This may have influenced the results.

PART II - SHINING A LIGHT ON VULNERABILITY

In the second half of this report, we draw on customer case studies and feedback from our mentors. In doing so, we highlight how our mentoring approach can identify the issues people are facing and can influence people’s knowledge, behaviours and thus ability to move towards getting out of poverty. We also examine how the demand for emergency energy support

increased during the COVID-19 pandemic and is likely to continue increasing as energy prices and the costs of living rise.

THE PROCESS

Case studies that are routinely collected by Home Energy Advice Team (HEAT) colleagues were examined for the research. The case studies collected were from the Inverclyde and Glasgow areas.

The majority of case studies were from an Inverclyde-based initiative 'Energy Activators' that was launched to deliver a full range of energy advice and resource efficiency programmes to residents of three of Inverclyde's main housing associations - Cloch, Oak Tree and Larkfield. This service is delivered by HEAT, and it was decided to use the Inverclyde area as it is the most deprived area in Scotland. Case studies from Glasgow were examined to establish if there was a difference in experiences of customers in these areas.

THE INSIGHT

A total of 83 customer case studies have been interviewed to establish the impact of the HEAT support over the 12-month period of support. All case study findings can be seen in Appendix 10.

Findings confirm there are several issues that our customers are struggling with.

The main issues are:

- Low Income/Unemployment
- Struggling with the implications of rising energy costs, including self-disconnection
- Struggling with mental health

The main groups who were affected are:

- Young families
- Elderly households
- Disabled households

Other issues related specifically to new tenants include:

- Off supply (new tenant)/no credit/help with new accounts
- Unknown supplier (New Tenant)/Trouble changing supplier
- Issues with meter

The issues were found to be the same in both Glasgow and Inverclyde. One aspect that stood out with some of the Glasgow case studies was that some customers did not have fluent English, and interpreting services were required to help to support them.

VIEW FROM THE FRONTLINE

“It infuriates me that there are people out there struggling unnecessarily. Suppliers need to hear the real stories, from real people and real experiences from people like us who are dealing with it every single day”.

“Policy makers should come and walk a day in our shoes – otherwise they don’t get it. They don’t understand. People are choosing between heating and eating, and some people are choosing between heating, eating and they are not eating themselves because they are feeding their kids”.

“When I am trying to get people debt relief and I’m looking at people’s income, I have no idea how people are getting by, how are they surviving? They have to get extra help from the foodbank, it is not good, especially seeing as though we are meant to be one of the richest countries in the world – that’s not the reality of it for people. If policy makers really want to make a change and they really want to be a good government, they need to be realistic about things”.

It is evident from responses that those working directly with those in fuel poverty feel a disconnect between government services, policy makers and themselves. This might be bridged by improving communication between these actors through third party organisations which specialise in doing so.

METER ISSUES AND ASSOCIATED IMPACTS

“It is very difficult to give advice remotely to people. Even reading a meter remotely is more difficult as more and more people have digital meters – the simplest meters have no display at all and are impossible to read in a dark cupboard for example”.

“Digital meters have lots of screens with numbers and it’s not evident what the numbers mean – they include the time, date, and electricity use, which are very confusing. Older meters used to be clear on what these things meant”.

“My mother-in-law moved supplier and was issued with a new card. It was a microchip card – but she has smart meter which can’t take this type of card, so a new meter needs to be installed, and debt is racking up”.

“Roll out for smart meters for all electric heating was not thought through at all. People are making good decisions, but I’ve got people who have been waiting 2-3 years for a meter change and the debt is just building up and up and up, but it’s not the customers fault”.

“Today I was dealing with a lady, she’s 75 years old, with cancer, she’s got the incorrect meter type and it hasn’t been fixed. She hasn’t used heating for 2 years”. She uses a hot water bottle about with a blanket because she was too scared”.

Case studies show that the roll-out of next generation smart meters are causing logistical and technical issues for vulnerable customers. Waiting times have been extremely long for fixes or installations, and when installed practical difficulties such as difficulty to understand or see readings persist. Policy makers and energy suppliers might consider these issues in the creation of future smart meters, as well as in updates to the current generation and roll out of smart meters.

CONTRIBUTING TO CLIMATE CHANGE

“I’ve been to customers’ (more affluent) houses who really want to try and address climate change, they’ve got the best of intentions. These people who are in fuel poverty, they have got the best intentions as well. We know they do the recycling, and they try to cut electricity and save as much as they can, they have got the best intentions, it’s just they have to prioritise. When it comes to saving the planet, or saving your wallet, saving your bank balance, saving yourself. It’s not that they are not interested in climate change, of course they are, they are concerned, it’s just less of a concern when it comes to heating or eating. The priority is different for them”.

“The sad thing is a lot of our customers, although they’re probably not as concerned about it, they are probably the ones who are doing the most, because they are not using anything (energy). So, they’re probably the ‘greenest’ in society, but it’s not through choice necessarily”.

These accounts confirm that many of those in fuel poverty desire to engage in initiatives to address climate change. The reality that this group may be the greenest in society is often overlooked, and inadvertently removes them from public discourse regarding energy savings or improvements in efficiency. Active efforts must be made to include this vulnerable group in the climate conversation and readdress the imbalance of energy use across households of various incomes.

HEATING OR EATING – THE NECESSITY OF COOKING

“People think ‘just pop in a Fray Bentos pie’ but those are the worst things for people in fuel poverty to cook. If they can’t afford their energy, how will they cook it?”

“The oven uses quite a lot of energy. That’s another thing we have to look at – what is in the food parcel. Give people stuff that lasts, pop in a couple of Pot Noodles, but what if they haven’t got enough money to boil the kettle? Boiling the kettle and putting the oven on actually costs quite a lot. We need to give food parcels people can eat”.

“At the Wise Group food bank, we had to start making what they call an ‘ambient’ bag that was stuff that you didn’t cook, and I’d never heard of that in my life. It’s stuff that you can keep in your cupboards, but you don’t need to cook. That’s the saddest thing that the country is moving to having to give out bags like that and people are living in such circumstances”.

Accounts on the impracticality of cooking hot meals are evidence of another implication for rationing or self-disconnecting energy supplies.

THE STIGMA

“I’m fed of people who are struggling on welfare benefits being made to feel like they’re scum”.

“Programmes like Benefit Britain, and Benefits Street, they don’t help. That’s turning a biased view against people who are on welfare benefits and making them feel like scroungers, making them feel like they are just take, take, taking and as if they are the lowest of the low and don’t deserve any quality of life because they’re on benefits and they don’t deserve any quality of life. Like I say the programmes about people on benefits is just playing into that narrative that all people on benefits are the same, they’re all at it (fraud). Most people have to fight to get what they are entitled to and it’s not right”.

Stigma stands as a barrier to engagement with vulnerable customers and can be reduced through positive messaging campaigns from energy suppliers, government and partners organisations.

SUPPORT VIA ENERGY SUPPLIERS

“One of the things energy suppliers do to help customers is the Warm Home Discount but they’ve changed how they deliver that, so all the application forms are now online, and some suppliers only open the application windows for a small period of time, but a lot of them don’t even tell the customers it’s there. It depends on what group they are in, so there are so many people that are entitled to that but don’t have a clue and totally miss out on £140”.

“The way some suppliers do it, theirs is a lucky draw. There’s a very small window when applications are open and it’s basically if your name gets picked out of the hat. They say they don’t charge standard charges, but they do, they are called something else. They charge so many pence for the first kilowatt of that day which is basically a standard charge they just don’t call it that. They’ve packaged it differently”.

With many energy suppliers signing up to Energy UK’s Vulnerability Commitment, there is now a public forum and reference point for best practice regarding vulnerable customers. As can be seen from accounts above, support is not always available for difficult to reach customers, and some energy suppliers still have work to do on engaging with these customers in a positive way.

DIGITAL EXCLUSION

“We talked about the Warm Home Discount which is all digital. What about those who don’t have the equipment, knowledge of skills to do things digitally? It’s mainly older people. Warm Home Discount is aimed at those people but it’s not always easy to access.

“You’ve got two groups for the Warm Home Discount - broader group and the core group. The core group get it automatically because that links into the Department for Work and Pensions. The broader group are all different energy suppliers who have different criteria, so depending on their criteria, that decides whether or not you get it. We make referrals to some suppliers if customers ring us up and for some, we can make a direct referral. Some offer a link to the online form - you know yourself if someone sends you a link to an online form, you’ll probably say I’ll do that later. We say to the customer fill it in now because if you don’t, you’re going to miss out on it. Often some people can’t do this themselves”.

These accounts show that mentorship is an essential connection point for some vulnerable customers with digital tools necessary to complete applications or communicate with their

energy suppliers. Suppliers and partners might consider alternative means of reaching this group of customers, such as through non-digital mediums or qualitative in-person outreach.

ENERGY SAVING ADVICE

“We provide advice to save money on energy. Many people are using electric bar heaters or halogen heaters. They are likely not to use gas or are disconnecting gas as everyone needs electric for basics – for the fridge and lights. We give advice about the costs of using electric heating. Tips are given to keep heating on but save money. Many customers would find it much easier to have only one bill for the energy use”.

Evidence from our mentors suggests that it has become increasingly prevalent that energy advice is not what customers want initially, for many they are more concerned about financial support to keep their energy on and reduce debts. Nevertheless, our data and insight suggest that energy saving advice and mentoring is important in creating sustainable behavioural change.

MENTORS – RELATABLE THROUGH LIVED EXPERIENCE

“Mentors at the Wise Group have real life experience. I remember needing extra electricity but didn’t have the money to get it because I was on benefits, so I understand”.

“I was on benefits and I was sitting with everything off with just a duvet round me because it was a couple of days before I got paid and the electricity meter had 89p left to get me through two days and it was two days until I could put any money on it and it was right at the bottom of emergency credit, I had no money and the gas had run out. It was winter so I just sat with a duvet round me, and I could only have a small lamp on so I could read a book. So, I’ve lived it, I know. The only thing I had on apart from the lamp was the fridge. I was like, what do I do here?”

“It’s heart-breaking to see. You read all these stories be it in social media or on the Good Morning Britain or whatever it is and, but we are seeing it for real. This isn’t made up; we are dealing with people every day who have to go weeks without a Universal Credit payment. This is the reality for people every single day and we see it every day, so we know it’s real. It’s not just sob stories that are made up”.

“I think a lot of our customers would have committed suicide without it, that’s the harsh reality of it. If there weren’t the services that we offer, a lot of customers wouldn’t have anyone to fight on their behalf. And that’s not an exaggeration. A lot of people have been at the total end of their tether, on the edge of that cliff. Our teams have actually been the light at the end of that tunnel that save people, and it’s not that they’ve lifted them all out of fuel poverty, it’s just that somebody cares.”

“Some people don’t know the services are available and haven’t asked for help. Often somebody has identified that they need help and put them onto us. They have no idea all of this support is freely available”.

In some cases, relatable lived experience helped to reduce the embarrassment associated with discussing fuel poverty as mentors themselves could share their own struggles with energy sustainability. As such, more customers opened up about their situation may have been the case with an anonymous caller or online survey. Further examples of such issues are featured in the case studies in Appendix 12.

DEMAND FOR EMERGENCY ENERGY SUPPORT

It is evident from the support that has been provided that low income and unemployment has risen since the start of the pandemic, coinciding with a change in Universal Credit and rising energy costs. As such, the main area of support has related to issuing emergency credit/funds to enable customers to keep their gas and electricity on.

Our HEAT energy services in the financial year 20/21, during the pandemic, saw an increase in customers needing support and advice, and the total household savings made. The following table shows the considerable increase in people struggling to meet energy costs, increasing debts and needing to understand how to reduce energy.

Percentage changes in customer numbers and savings

	TOTAL 2019/20	TOTAL 2020/21	% CHANGE 2019/20 TO 2020/21
ACTIVITIES:			
NO. CUSTOMERS RECEIVING INCOME MAXIMISATION ADVICE:	1,259	5,646	348
ESTIMATED AMOUNT OF ADDITIONAL BENEFIT LEVERED	£184,960	£575,065	211
NO. CUSTOMERS RECEIVING ENERGY ADVICE:	2,180	6,240	186
ESTIMATED AMOUNT OF SAVINGS LEVERED FROM ENERGY ADVICE	£570,544	£1,271,498	123
NO. CLIENTS RECEIVING ENERGY DEBT ADVICE:	150	358	139
ESTIMATED AMOUNT OF DEBT WRITE OFF	£143,696	£203,238	41

- Numbers of **customers receiving income maximisation advice** increased by 348% on 2019/20 figures to 2020/21 figures
- The **estimated amount of additional benefit levied** increased by 211% from 2019/20 to 2020/21
- The **number of customers receiving energy advice** increased by 186% on 2019/20 figures to 2020/21 figures

- The **estimated amount of savings levered from energy advice** increased by 123% on 201/20 figure to 2020/21.
- The **number of customers receiving energy debt advice** increased by 139% from 2019/20 to 2020/21
- **Estimated debt written off** increased by 41% from 2019/20 to 2020/21

This information demonstrates that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted greatly on customers in terms of income and employment. More found themselves in need of advice and financial assistance. This is confirmed from feedback received from the mentors themselves. It is notable that the increase in debt written off (41%) fell considerably below the increase in customers seeking energy debt advice (139%). With several energy suppliers signing up to the Vulnerability Commitment, this may be an area for better engagement and delivery for vulnerable customers.

Figures collected from 2021/22 up to September 2021 (6 months) already exceed the figures for the entirety of 2019/20. With the pending energy price rise, changes to Universal Credit, the continued impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the end of furlough, this figure could increase above 2020/21 figures in 2021/22.

This information also demonstrates how dedicated mentoring services can have a vital, positive impact on people in times of crisis.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND POLICY

These initial findings are both worrying and encouraging. They suggest that too many people are choosing to disconnect their energy to get by and point to the positive impact that mentoring can have as a route to improved confidence with better household energy use.

Vulnerability and poverty strongly correlate with poor control or environmental participation with household energy. Therefore, if the UK's fuel poverty is to be addressed, one point of focus for government policy should be engaging in mentoring services that support behavioural change. Moreover, our findings suggest that our customers do not always need to have financial support to establish better financial or environmental approaches to their energy use. Mentorship to independently manage energy and seek out support is crucial in sustained energy security, a prerequisite to addressing issues relating to health, employment and education resulting from fuel poverty. Energy suppliers signed up to the Vulnerability Commitment may also benefit from such an approach.

This report outlines that there are gaps in how the most vulnerable will be able to engage with net zero and we would like to see new mentoring services to address this. Action from government to invest in services with a mentoring approach that can most effectively address some of the eight dimensions outlined in this report would be valuable. Certain structural issues, such as the predominance of electric heating in households struggling with fuel poverty and the accessibility of smart meters, should also be addressed so that all households can be a part of reaching a sustainable and just net zero.

We also identified limitations in our participatory consultation and recommend that there should be further exploration of the potential support that might be given to investigating the positive impact that mentoring can have.



We hope official engagement with, and response to this report will encourage its utilisation by researchers and help providers identify where improvements in the provision of mentoring needs to be made to help bridge the gap between vulnerable customer, fuel poverty and net zero.

LIST OF APPENDICES

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2. COP26 Fuel Poverty Research HEAT
3. Scotland HEAT survey findings
4. Scotland HEAT survey analysis
5. SIMD by performance
6. Customer SIMD data
7. COP26 Fuel Poverty Research Wise Steps
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