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Challenges for advisors working with vulnerable people

Karn Shah, Senior Project Manager

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Centre for Sustainable Energy

- Independent national charity based in Bristol
- Our work tackles the twin challenges of climate change and fuel poverty
- We manage a range of fuel poverty projects and retrofitting schemes. Our Home Energy team has 60 staff members covering projects across the south west.
- During 2021-22 our energy advisors supported 24,881 enquiries from around 15,145 people, saving them over £3.2m (an average of £213 per household) – the highest demand for our advice service to date.



Impact and costs of fuel poverty

- Physical health impacts – cold homes increase the likelihood of ill health, higher risk of heart attacks, strokes, falls, breathing problems, pneumonia and flu
- Mental health impacts – poor mental health as a result of living in a cold home and struggling to afford energy bills or being in debt, as well as social isolation
- 63,000 excess winter deaths across England and Wales between 2020 and 2021
- Impact on health and social care – costs to NHS estimated to be £1.36 billion



Wider context – winter 2022/23

- Prices rising at a faster rate than at any time in the last 40 years. UK households in fuel poverty predicted to rise from 7 million to 10-11 million this winter.
- We are estimating 30-40% increase in demand, but we won't be looking at the full stats until the end of March 2023.
- Advice line shifts end up being back-to-back calls, many of which are distressing – a very challenging environment for our advisors.
- Type of advice sought is changing too. We've seen a fourfold increase in demand for advice on financial support and energy debt, and more people asking about damp, mould and condensation due to lack of heating.



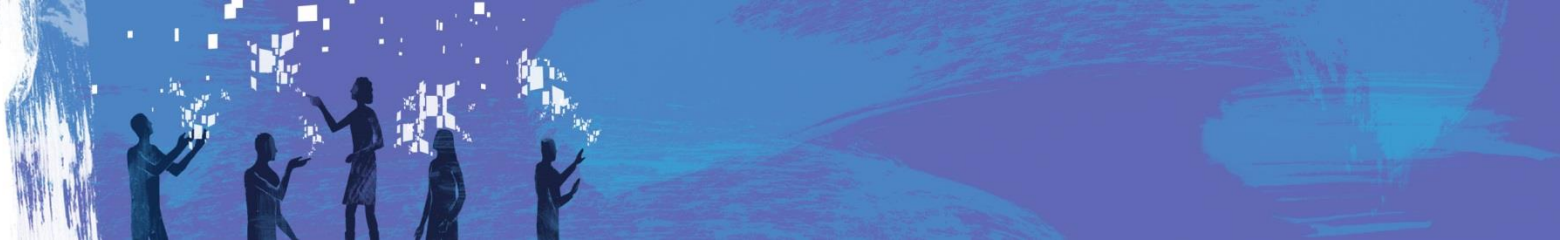
Nature of our support

- Calls getting much harder to deal with:
 - People are increasingly in distress and having to make choices about basic essentials
 - People's mental health suffering due to cost-of-living crisis – and support is limited.
 - Calls with suicidal clients and clients with safeguarding concerns getting more regular
 - People are in immediate crisis with their energy supplier, receiving threatening letters or bailiffs – clients have no bandwidth to engage with us, and need multiple calls.
 - People self-disconnecting as they have no money to top-up their pre-payment meters, doing this with the knowledge that it will have an impact on their health.
 - Calls from parents of children with asthma/ other conditions that are worsened by the cold. They have no choice but to heat the property for their child's health and are often very distressed about the cost of this.



Nature of our support

- Significant increase in demand for financial support – e.g. fuel vouchers, food shopping vouchers. This is now an essential part of our service, and gives clients some breathing space while they wait for in-depth casework support.
- Clients getting upset on the phone when vouchers run out.
- Stronger partnerships with food banks, now making ten times more foodbank referrals than we did previously.
- Many other agencies forced to stop taking more referrals – increasing number and complexity of referrals to us.



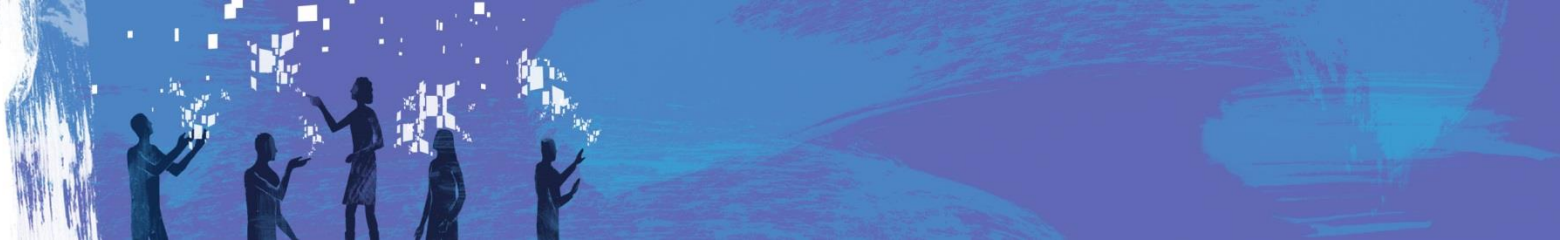
Top issue: dealing with suppliers

- Very little action from suppliers on proactively identifying vulnerable customers, improving their customer service or implementing additional measures to support those struggling with their bills.
- Hours wasted every day waiting to get through to energy suppliers to advocate on our clients' behalf. We support very vulnerable people and every hour we waste waiting to speak to them is an hour we could have spent helping someone else.
- A few suppliers have special teams dedicated to vulnerable customers, but many don't and the training that their support staff receive is sadly lacking the soft skills needed to deal with people in crisis.



Dealing with suppliers

- No simple/standard way of getting nominated to customer accounts.
 - Getting a Form of Authority should be simpler. But inconsistent approaches, poor (or a lack of any) record-keeping, insufficient staffing of phone lines, insufficient training of staff all form a massive barrier.
 - Very difficult for customers who don't use email to get someone nominated to their account.
 - Worked much better during COVID – so it is possible!
- Huge amounts of wasted time waiting to get through to a customer service agent.
 - Advisors being passed from pillar to post with no issue resolution
 - Inconsistent approach for complaints. Resolver is useful, but needs FoA. Suppliers only responding when case taken to Ombudsman.
 - Direct line for advice organisations is required



Dealing with suppliers

- Customers not receiving their Warm Home Discount, with suppliers incorrectly telling them they need a valid EPC to receive the WHD. In some cases, forcing the customers to pay for an EPC.
- Lot of customers on non-smart pre-payment meters contacting us as they have not received their Energy Bills Support Scheme vouchers. All we can advise is to raise a complaint with their supplier. When clients are trying to get through to their supplier to complain, they are waiting for a very long time, and we are hearing from some clients that they are getting cut off in the queue. A lot of clients are reaching the point of giving up on it.
- Many more non-English speakers asking us for support. Suppliers not consistent in provision of interpreting services – often we have to pay for this just so that they can communicate with their customers!



A case study

- One of the best (or worst?) examples shared on our website:
<https://www.cse.org.uk/news/view/2725>
 - A vulnerable customer on SSE's Priority Services Register found her payment card no longer worked, and her bills were based on estimates despite having a smart meter.
 - She called SSE, but every time, it took hours to speak to someone – once waiting almost 5 hours before getting through to an advisor – who told her payment cards were no longer accepted, and hung up without offering a resolution!
 - This is when our advisor, Daisy, stepped in. She was told the meter issues would be fixed within 10 working days, and that they would send out a new energy payment card. Unfortunately, nothing happened.



A case study

- One of the best (or worst?) examples shared on our website:
<https://www.cse.org.uk/news/view/2725>
 - Since then, 4 complaints made, each time SSE saying they have no record of the complaints, despite them giving us complaint reference numbers! Complaint then raised with the Ombudsman
 - As far as we can tell, SSE hasn't recorded anything about this case or the issues we've raised. They do not recognise our advisor as being named on the account to advocate for the customer, despite this being arranged at the start of the ten calls.
 - huge impact on the wellbeing of the client and our advisor, who's feeling utterly dejected and demoralised. Our client now believes that SSE have purposely put her into debt. Our advisor was pushed to the brink. And so much time wasted – time that could have been spent helping many more clients – just due to supplier incompetence.



Impact on us as a charity

- Our funding is not sufficient to speak to every client multiple times – so tough choices need to be made about casework eligibility. Despite this, our casework waiting lists are long – and growing.
- Long waiting lists, casework criteria, and back-to-back calls on our advice line all have an impact on our advisors. Particularly when the work is relentless, often upsetting, and the scope of our support has grown so extensively beyond our core of energy advice.
- An extended support package has been put together for our advisors – buddying, mentoring for new staff, time-outs, safeguarding and suicide awareness training.
- Still, retention and recruitment is a big challenge – there are easier jobs!



Impact on us as a charity

- But as a charity it's really challenging. There has been a huge increase in demand, and it takes longer to help people due to their circumstances. There's a two-fold financial impact:
 - It takes at least three months to train an advisor fully and this cost isn't covered by the funding we have so that comes out of our charitable reserves.
 - The complexity of the cases means it takes longer to provide the support needed per client and projects go over budget.
- There's no funding nationally to support fuel poverty advice. That means people face a postcode lottery when they need support & we are continually searching for funding to keep our service going.



Our key asks

- Changes in the way suppliers support vulnerable customers:
 - Form of Authority – an easier and standardised process is needed
 - Dedicated line for advice agencies for each suppliers
 - Complaints process
 - Funded interpreting services
- Funding for advice: Energy advice support services are overwhelmed and there is no national funding for in-depth fuel poverty support and advice. The government needs to establish a national network of local energy advice providers to support the most vulnerable households.



Thank you

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