

## Project type: **Helping people who are struggling to pay their bills**

Name of example: **Warmer Improved Somerset Homes**

### **The organisation**

Warmer Improved Somerset Homes (WISH) is funded by the Nationwide Foundation and led by the Centre for Sustainable Energy (CSE), working in partnership with Somerset Care and Repair. Although not a community-led project, WISH is an example of a successful fuel poverty advice service that might be replicated in whole or in part by a community group working at a more local level.

### **The project**

WISH is a fuel poverty advice service supporting older people in rural areas of Somerset who live in cold, damp homes or who struggle to pay their fuel bills. The project uses trained energy advisers to provide advice and support to householders to address issues of fuel poverty and help them to stay warm and independent at home. See [www.cse.org.uk/wish](http://www.cse.org.uk/wish).

The WISH project integrates a range of advice addressing different aspects of fuel poverty: energy efficiency improvements to housing, advice on benefits, fuel debt services, and help with reducing energy use and fuel bills. The project employs a team of energy advisers to carry out home visits, case work, outreach and liaise with energy companies and other agencies on behalf of householders.

All WISH advisers attend the NEA City and Guilds training course in Energy Advice and have had 'top up' training throughout the project. This enables them to give robust, up-to-date advice on what householders can do in their homes to keep their energy use down, or on ways to use energy to keep warm enough without having bills they can't afford.

WISH is a three-year project which has paid staff, including two full time peripatetic energy advisers and a back up team. The approach might be scaled down if a smaller budget was available although having a project with wide geographical coverage makes it easier to publicise. The project timescales gave plenty of lead in time to set up systems and partnerships and to improve the project as it developed. Having full time staff also means that customers can quickly get access to advice and support, either by phone or through an adviser visiting them in their home.

The peripatetic energy advisers are based in Somerset Care and Repair's offices and are able to refer customers to home improvement services as well as providing energy and fuel debt advice ([www.somersetcareandrepair.org/services/energy-efficiency](http://www.somersetcareandrepair.org/services/energy-efficiency)). The link to CSE means that advisers can tap in to up to date information on grants and subsidies available to householders for energy efficiency improvements. The project doesn't pay for energy efficiency improvements but the advisers can make referrals to schemes or help householders to apply. More in-depth casework is often needed to write

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applications for grants for home improvements on behalf of individuals, liaise with external agencies for further support, or to hand-hold customers through the process of switching energy tariff or applying for benefits (including appeals).

The project also provides training to community groups, and to health and social care professionals (including local authority staff) who are in contact with people living in fuel poverty, to help them understand the energy-related needs of older householders and the services available to them. The project is promoted through various routes, including a leaflet, referral form and postcard; local talks, adverts in newsletters and articles in newspapers; webpages and links with the local energy advice telephone line.

## **Achievements**

In just under three years, WISH has provided support and advice to a total of 1,700 customers, of whom 540 have received one or more home visits. The project has generated referrals for some 500 energy efficiency measures carried out in customers' homes, including cavity wall insulation, loft insulation and heating improvements. A further 80 home improvements have also been carried out, from small modifications (grab rails, smoke alarms, and window and door locks) to larger works such as walk-in showers and roof repairs, totalling around £200,000.

WISH has secured around £380,000 in grants and debt clearance awards on behalf of customers, and a further £180,000 per year in additional welfare benefits for individuals.

One beneficiary of the WISH project said "You can't believe how much it's changed my life. I used to dread my heating bills coming in. I'd go into the bedroom and just heat that one small room to cut down the costs. But I don't need to worry anymore. The benefits have made a hell of a difference."

Another customer reported: "It was like having a light turned on at the end of the tunnel. Now I've enough money to last the week, whereas before I struggled. And I don't worry about putting the heating on during the very cold winter... I'm grateful for any help I received, and I would definitely recommend WISH. The advisors were helpful, kind and friendly. They helped when I thought I had nowhere else to go."

## **Lessons learned:**

On the basis of its experience managing the WISH project, CSE has identified a number of important factors that have contributed to its success:

- Good reporting systems to be able to keep track of customers and record achievements.
- Trained, friendly advisors who are approachable and know their stuff.
- Home visits to reach customers who can't attend events and give tailored advice about how they use energy in their homes.
- Involvement of a number of different organisations brings better offer for customers.
- Keeping regularly updated lists of subsidies, grants and low interest loans that are available for energy efficiency improvements for people's homes. This includes national schemes (e.g. Green Deal and ECO), energy company funds, grant making organisations, local authority subsidies, or groups that can provide free or low cost draught proofing or energy efficiency lighting.

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## Recommendations

The following recommendations might be useful for community groups planning similar projects:

- Ensure you provide thorough energy advice training for anyone advising householders, since it's essential to give good advice and reliable information to help people to use energy more efficiently and get the best out of any energy efficiency improvements they make to their homes.
- Information sheets (e.g. those offered via CSE's home energy advice website) are useful as a back-up resource for individual customers.
- Make sure you have contact details for local support agencies that can provide more in depth help for vulnerable people, for example: agencies that can help with benefits checks and benefits applications; Age UK and organisations offering practical support for individuals; local support groups; CABs; energy agencies and so on.
- Be aware of issues around under- and overheating homes, and the ideal temperatures for living rooms and rooms that are less well used.
- Lots of people who can't afford their bills and keep their heating lower than it should be also have problems with damp and condensation so it's worth 'knowing your stuff' on these issues too.
- If you have something you can give away (e.g. room thermometers, draught proofing, or even free tea mugs) it will help you to get people interested.
- Don't promise more than you can offer – manage expectations and deliver what you promise.

## Resources

People



Currently the project has two full time energy advisors and a back up team of four covering project co-ordination, reporting, marketing, training, phone advice etc.

Technical skills



Good understanding of home energy use (all advisors have City and Guilds training), benefits eligibility and local support services.

Finances



Funding for the WISH project is from the Nationwide Foundation with additional funding secured from Local Action for Rural Communities and from Hastoe Housing Association.

Project partners



CSE ran this project with Somerset Care & Repair in Somerset.

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## **Green Deal potential**

The ECO has been designed specifically to help those who can't afford to adequately heat their homes, and so providing energy efficiency measures to these people should be a priority within the Green Deal and ECO. The advice and support offered in this project could be designed to go alongside those identifying and targeting people in fuel poverty for the ECO. In an energy advice project, Green Deal and ECO could be explained to householders as a means of financing energy efficiency improvements to their homes, and paid or voluntary energy advisers could play a key role in helping customers to arrange a Green Deal assessment, understand their Green Deal Advice report, and find the right Green Deal installer if they choose to go ahead with works.