

Southampton Healthy Homes: Taking a needs based approach to reducing fuel poverty risk amongst Southampton residents

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Introduction

Approximately 10,000 households in Southampton City are considered to be in fuel poverty.¹ Low household income, inefficient housing and high energy costs combine to increase the risk of fuel poverty, which can lead to health problems in children, older people and those with a long-term disability or illness.

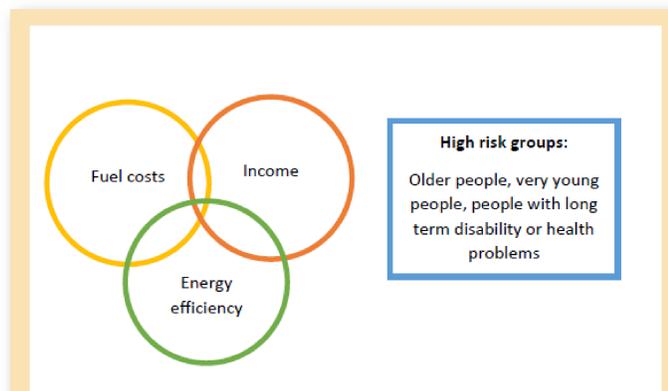


Figure 1 Factors contributing to an increased risk of fuel poverty

The link between cold temperature conditions and adverse health, including excess winter deaths is well documented.² However, the interaction between cold temperatures and health is complex and multi-factorial. What is recognised as being a key factor in this relationship is housing conditions. Figure 2 shows a simplified conceptual framework of the links between housing conditions and health as detailed in the 2015 NICE guidelines.²

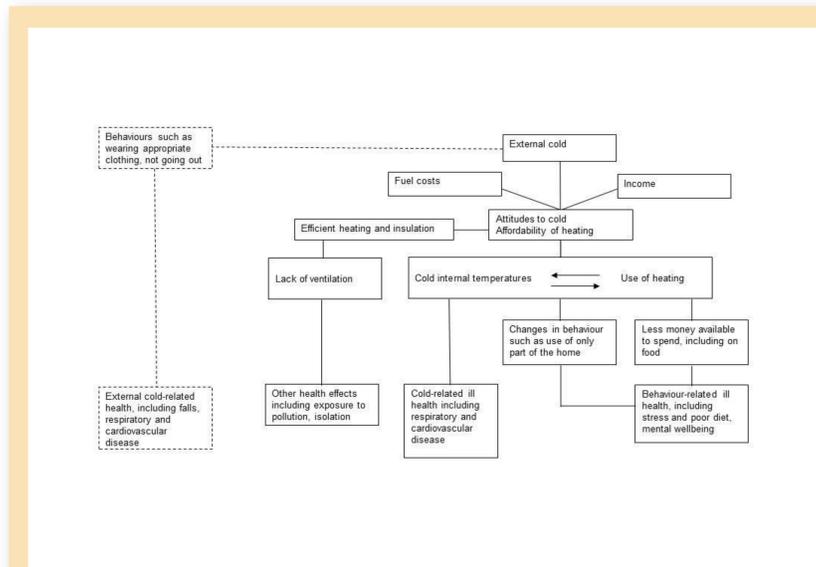


Figure 2 Factors linking cold temperatures to excess winter deaths and illness (adapted from NICE guidance²)

Southampton Healthy Homes (SHH)

Southampton Healthy Homes (SHH) was a British Gas Energy Trust (BGET) and Southampton City Council funded 15-month project, developed in consultation with the Southampton Warmth For All Partnership (SWAP). It was delivered by the Environment Centre (tEC) in conjunction with local partners and ran until the end of March 2017. The project was designed to help residents save money on their energy bills and keep their homes warm and was aimed mainly at those with a low income and/or a chronic health problem.

The main aims of the project were to:

- Reduce the impact of living in cold homes, particularly for those on a low income and/or with a chronic health condition through providing advice and practical interventions
- Increase awareness of fuel poverty and provide access to organisations who can offer assistance thus ensuring 'every contact counts'
- Provide support and, where possible, further measures to improve the health and wellbeing of vulnerable residents

The project was designed to take a 'needs-led' approach to tackling fuel poverty within the city by establishing a coordinated and comprehensive service to provide information, support and interventions for residents and aiming to target the drivers for illness linked to cold housing conditions.

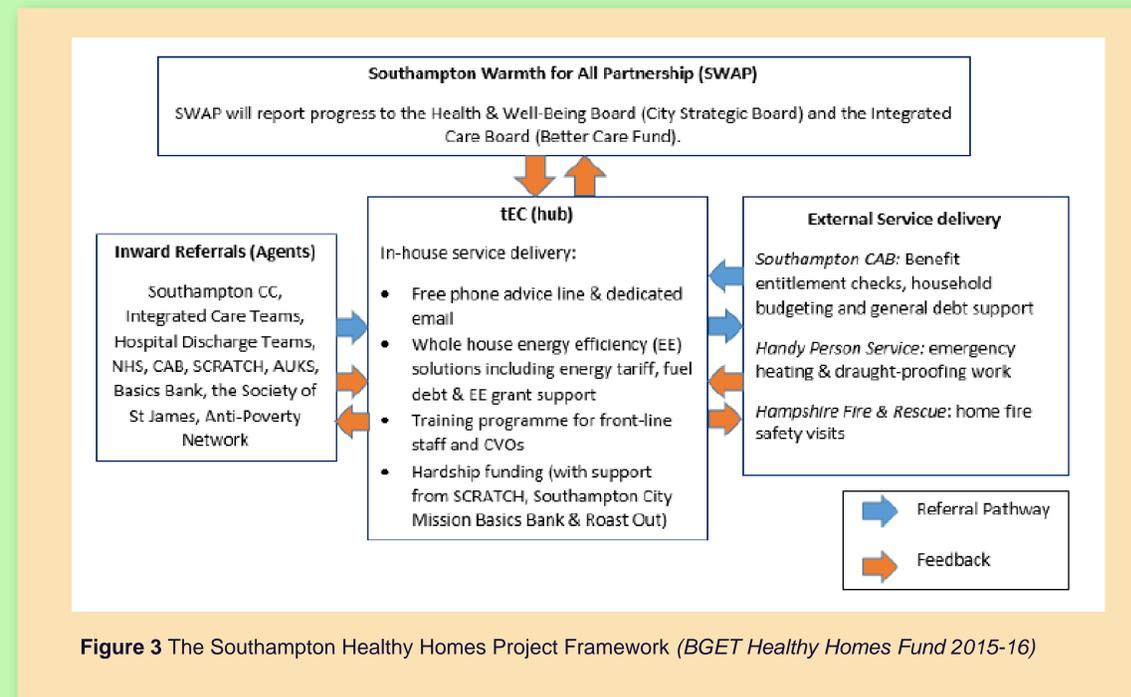


Figure 3 The Southampton Healthy Homes Project Framework (BGET Healthy Homes Fund 2015-16)

The SHH project was evaluated by Southampton City Council's Public Health Team to examine project process measures, including the number of people assisted by the project, as well as outputs including changes in household Energy Performance Certificate ratings (EPCs) as a measure of quantifying any reduction in the number of people living in cold homes.

A pragmatic before and after study was conducted using a health and wellbeing questionnaire completed by SHH clients at baseline and 6 months after involvement in the project. The survey aimed to capture measures of physical and mental health as well as health service usage of the resident population.

An interim qualitative evaluation was also undertaken as part of a Southampton University MSc dissertation in summer 2016 to capture client experiences of the project and its perceived benefits. Focus groups with project stakeholders were held to capture lessons to support future fuel poverty project design and delivery

Results

In total:

- 2,400 households were assisted during the scheme
- 405 'small' energy efficiency interventions were provided (e.g. draught proofing, low energy lightbulb provision)
- 102 'large' energy efficiency interventions were provided (e.g. heating system repair/replacement, first time central heating installation, double glazing, cavity wall insulation)
- 479 households were provided with emergency utility top-ups
- £424,034 of unclaimed benefits were secured
- 42 households demonstrated improved EPCs, with 21 entering the A-C band (A=very efficient)
- The project received £541,291 of funding overall (£41,310 from Southampton City Council)

The results of the quantitative evaluation are limited by a small sample size, particularly at the 6-month follow-up. A high proportion reported having either a physical or mental health problem at baseline and it may be that those who did not complete the follow-up survey were amongst the most vulnerable.

Although when asked directly via the quantitative survey, clients were often unable to link health benefits to improvements in the warmth of their house, results from the interim qualitative evaluation suggested that some did perceive improvements in their health and wellbeing and all were satisfied with the outcomes of the service³:

"...to have it (temperature) consistent and being able to have it consistently warm just makes a huge difference to the management of my condition"

"Because you can breathe a sigh of relief, you know, it's a..weight and a worry off your shoulders..I can actually plan ahead..and not stress quite as much because I know I can plan that I can function"

Conclusions

The Southampton Healthy Homes project demonstrated the value of taking a multidisciplinary, needs-based approach to tackling fuel poverty within a population.

It is challenging to demonstrate the health impact from complex interventions such as this, however the project was able to achieve its initial aims and outputs and facilitate improvements in household EPC ratings as well as securing a significant amount of household income.

Considering the factors known to contribute to fuel poverty, it is reasonable to infer that the improvements achieved in energy efficiency and income will contribute to reducing the number of residents living in fuel poverty and hence lead to improvements in their health and wellbeing.

REFERENCES

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