

Using qualitative research and partnership working to tackle fuel poverty

Summary

In Wirral Council's Public Health Team, we are developing an action plan for tackling fuel poverty in the borough. To ensure that our residents' lived experiences shape the design of the action plan, Public Health's Qualitative Insight Team did a piece of ethnographic research with residents to understand their challenges around fuel poverty. Researchers spent the day in the life of four residents. The case studies were used in a workshop, where we brought together Wirral colleagues and partners to develop strategic and operational actions for tackling fuel poverty in the short-long term. The case studies brought residents' issues to life, helping to show the complexity of fuel poverty and highlighting opportunities for partnership working. Using semi-structured interviews, the researchers then tested the actions that came out of the initial workshop with more residents experiencing fuel poverty. The findings highlighted what support residents thought would make a real difference to their lives. These findings will feed into a second action plan workshop in November this year, to ensure the implementation of the action plan is centred around evidence-based decision making.

Methodology

For the first phase of our research, the qualitative researchers spent up to a full day conducting ethnographic observations and conversations with four residents. This involved spending time in their homes, going shopping, and volunteering with them. Residents demonstrated how fuel poverty was affecting them, such as their energy use, mealtimes, and housing conditions. Photos, audio and video recordings were taken with consent.

The second phase of research involved 11 semi-structured interviews in residents' homes or community settings. We tested five support options using flashcards, which residents ranked in order of preference. Residents also offered their own suggestions and reflected on their challenges around accessing support.

We chose not to use the national definition of 'fuel poverty' when recruiting our participants, as we found it too restrictive. For example, in England, to be fuel poor you must be living in housing with an Energy Performance Certificate of D or below. Instead, we screened residents for vulnerabilities to fuel poverty that we identified in a literature review, such as long-term health conditions and low-income families with children. This allowed us to see the varied challenges people face across housing tenures in the deprived and affluent areas of our borough.

Wow factor

Broadening our definition of 'fuel poverty' provided insights into the lives of our residents who are overlooked by national measures. E.g. residents struggling in our affluent areas revealed the challenges they face heating large homes, keeping up with appearances, and having reservations about or limited understanding of the benefits system.

Synopsis

Our research has provided a greater understanding of fuel poverty in Wirral and has highlighted opportunities for partnership working in our effort to tackle fuel poverty as a local system. Fuel poverty is a priority area within Wirral's Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2022-2027 because 1 in 7 people in Wirral are living in fuel poverty and 1 in 4 in our more deprived areas. Cold homes cost

each Health and Wellbeing Board £10 million a year dealing with the consequences such as illness and excess deaths.

Our objective was to understand how fuel poverty is impacting different socio-economic groups across Wirral. We didn't want to just ask residents, we wanted to see first-hand their challenges. Spending time in resident's homes revealed how fuel poverty impacts many aspects of their lives, such as their health and wellbeing, finances, housing conditions and family relationships. It also revealed some of the extreme measures our residents are adopting to save energy. By sharing our residents' experiences with our partners at a workshop, using photos, videos, and audio clips, our colleagues and partners could see how they all had a role to play in tackling fuel poverty. Partners then came up with ideas of how they could work together and designed strategic or operational actions. For example, they discussed how healthcare and housing services could work together to support a woman who struggles to clean the mould in her home because of her stoma pain.

We then analysed the actions that came out of the workshop and condensed them into five potential support options, such as maximizing resident's income and improving the energy efficiency of their homes. We then went out and tested these support options with residents to hear if they would actually make a difference to their lives, making sure their experiences continue to shape the action plan design. Their preferences for support were shared at our latest Health and Wellbeing Board, helping members to put resident's lived experiences at the center of decision making. Insights from both phases of our research are being used to develop a winter preparedness campaign and commissioning of a comprehensive fuel poverty service in collaboration with a variety of internal and external stakeholders.

Alongside partner involvement, residents had an opportunity to shape the research design. E.g., the ethnography participants were in control of when and how the insights were gathered. Residents were provided with feedback on the outcomes of the action plan workshop, so they can see how their experiences are shaping decision making.

What should LARIA members learn from your award entry?

The first key take away is that qualitative research, particularly ethnography, can offer decision makers and local authorities an opportunity to build trust with their residents and see the often-unspoken ways that social issues like fuel poverty affect residents. Introducing resident's lived experiences into the workshop brought the issues to life and led to more focused discussions.

The second key take away is that our research highlights the limitations that national measures of fuel poverty pose when trying to understand the lived experiences of residents. Our participants lived in a broad range of housing and their amount and source of income varied. In some cases, residents were on the brink of being unable to afford their energy bills due to a sudden change in their circumstances, whereas others had been struggling for years. Using qualitative insights uncovered the breadth of the issues residents face in their day to day lives, giving us a deeper understanding of 'fuel poverty' which goes beyond the rigid measures and definitions currently in place.