

Keeping warm in later life project

WILL NEW POLICY ADDRESS BEHAVIOUR CHANGE IN ORDER TO SUPPORT THE ELDERLEY TO KEEP WARM IN THE HOME?

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Background

Cold, damp housing is linked to health problems, health inequalities and excess winter deaths (Marmot Review Team, 2011). Older people in fuel poverty are susceptible to the negative impacts of living in a cold home (Liddell & Morris 2010). The study explores issues influencing the ability for older people to keep warm and in accessing help to assist them in doing so. The presentation considers the interrelation of factors impacting on the success of future policy initiatives including Green Deal and Welfare Reform.

Methods

- Semi-structured in-depth interviews with older people (n=50) and health and social care staff (n=25).
- Interviews explored the knowledge, beliefs and values regarding keeping warm at home.
- Six focus groups, three with older people (n= 24), one with staff (n=8), and two with strategic leads in the public and third sector (n=13).
- Data was analysed using framework analysis.

Results

Mindset and Values: influenced the behaviour of older people regarding keeping their homes warm and impacted upon their ability to overcome barriers. Hardiness, stoicism and thrift were a common value of the participants.

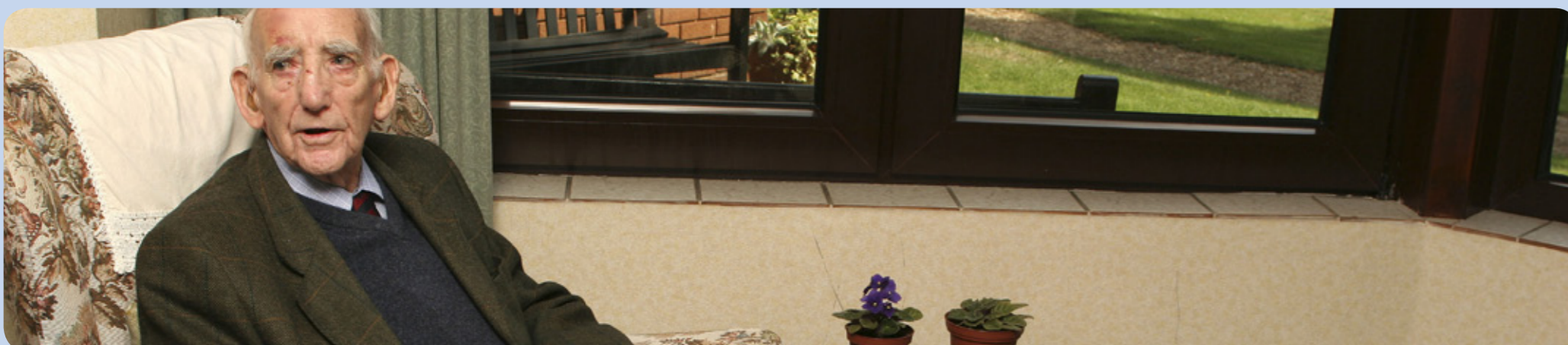
"Well I wear fewer clothes, but if it gets cold I put more clothes on or wrap a fleece round me rather than turn the heating up. That is always my last resort, to turn the heating up. Oh yes, because I was trained to be frugal, it was part of my upbringing. You didn't have a lot so you were careful with what you did have. And with the costs rising now, I'm certainly not extravagant with the heating, I'm very wary." (OP34)

"It's because they've lived such a frugal life through the wars and beyond. They've had to be so tight with their money and so frugal that to spend an excessive, what they consider an excessive amount of money now is quite vulgar to them and it's just not in their mindset. Their mindset is to spend as little as possible and get by with as little as possible, and that's what they've been doing all their life." (S12)

Previous experience enhanced mistrust and fear: of banks and utility companies. Participants reported fear of further energy price increases and welfare reform. This influenced their behaviour regarding heating and payment.

"I don't like Direct Debits¹. Like I say I'm quite a private person, I don't want anybody knowing my business, I don't want them knowing, you know, having these whatever, these bank cards and things like that, I'm just not interested." (Op28)

"It's always at the back of my mind, you need to turn this heating off now, you can sort of cope.... I seem to be falling a little bit backwards in every direction with all sorts of things... what worries me more is the way the Government is talking about stopping even more benefits. I mean I might as well just put my head in a noose you know, because there's just no way can I sink any lower anymore, it's just a real bind trying to get through now." (OP50)



Discussion

Older people are at a greater risk of fuel poverty and suffering from the negative impacts that living in a cold home has on health. The study findings provide insight into the behaviours which may put them at risk of being more vulnerable. The findings raise concerns over the direction of which future policy and welfare reform is heading and older people may struggle to respond positively to the proposals. The Green Deal is the government's new initiative which will allow householders access of up to £10,000 to make their homes warmer and cheaper to run. Costs will be repaid through savings on energy bills. The mindset and values of older people seem likely to influence their willingness to take out such loans and improve heating technology which they feel they can live without or ill afford. Having lived most of their lives in a society based on cash, confusing payment systems and irregular bills will ultimately deter older people from benefiting from such initiatives. Behaviour is not always anticipated or understood by policy. The findings from this study question the likelihood that fuel poverty and health inequalities will be reduced by current policy initiatives.

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¹Direct debits are the cheapest way of paying for energy.

References

Liddell C, Morris C. (2010) Fuel poverty and human health: A review of recent evidence. Energy Policy 38 2987-2997

Marmot Review Team (2011). The Health Impacts of Cold Homes and Fuel Poverty. Friends of the Earth England



Technology: Participants revealed poor knowledge on heating and banking technology. The majority prefer to use visible methods to keep warm e.g. electrical heaters and gas fires as opposed to central heating. Paying bills in cash is also a preferred option over direct debits or internet banking and meant they paid a higher tariff.

"I don't think they know how to set the timers and things. A lady I went to, hers was on the stairs and she didn't have a clue. She just put the boiler on every day and that was it. And her house was quite cold because she only had it on for certain times of the day but she did have an electric heater which she plugged in which was at the side of her to keep her warm. She wasn't really bothered about the rest of the house. They keep themselves warm, they sit with blankets on. But I don't think they know how to work these new systems." (S6)

"We like to pay it as it comes. If it came this afternoon I'd go down to the Post Office the same day as I got it and I'd pay it - that's the way I like to pay my bills." (OP9)

"Yeah because if you've got money in your purse you know how much money you've got to spend, and when you've spent it you've got no more.... And I'm from a cash society, we were a cash society when I was younger, and I don't want to join this one, so I'm quite happy as I am." (Op28)

