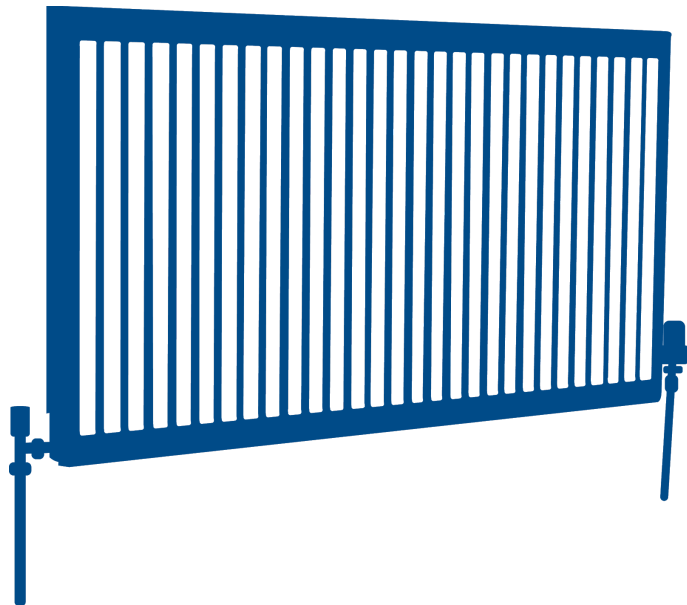


Warm homes, affordable fuel and healthy people: Executive summary

How local Citizens Advice
can help



Introduction

Cold homes and unaffordable fuel bills put your health and well-being at risk. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) wants to see a network of local [housing and health referral services](#) address the problem. Front-line health workers refer 'at risk' patients to a single point of contact that coordinates a package of support. This might include a cheaper energy tariff, installation of energy efficiency measures or a benefits check.

Citizens Advice supports the NICE guideline and has carried out some practical projects to help develop housing and health referral services, summarised below. However, we think more action is needed to make referral services commonplace throughout the country. We want:

1. All local authorities and health agencies to work with voluntary sector agencies, like Citizens Advice, to provide housing and health referral services in their area.
2. NHS trusts to recognise the vital role housing and health referral services can play in alleviating winter pressure on health services.
3. Public Health England, NHS England and relevant government departments, to oversee and review implementation of NG6 and promote good practice.
4. Local authorities and health agencies to consult the [Cold Home Toolkits](#) for practical guidance on setting up housing and health referral services.
5. Local authorities and local health agencies to make sure there are adequate and sustainable resources for housing and health referral services.

This document summarises Citizens Advice's work on housing and health referral services. You can find the full report of our work [here](#).

The winter resilience project

Seven local Citizens Advice took part in a pilot to trial and test different referral pathways with health partners. Internal and external evaluations¹ of the pilot provide rich material on our experience:

We reached the right people and learned a lot about their needs - 80% of clients found it difficult to afford their heating costs and all were either disabled or had a long term health condition.

Giving back a sense of control - the pilot's biggest impact was on clients' feelings of control of their energy use and ability to keep warm. There was a substantial improvement in clients' ability to manage their energy and pay their fuel bills.

Impact on health and well-being - most clients experienced little change in their physical health, with some clients' health continuing to decline. This was in the context that many clients had severe health problems. We were not able to establish whether we slowed down the rate of decline. However, we did find an overall modest improvement in clients' well-being.

Supporting clients - making sure clients got the right support package often required skilled advisers carrying out face-to-face case work on complex problems. Energy support included installation of energy efficiency measures, how to use heating controls, claiming the Warm Home Discount, sorting out energy arrears dispensation, changing suppliers and/or tariffs and registration on fuel companies' Priority Service Registers.

We also often helped clients claim benefits, manage debts or sort out care needs. Our ability to provide holistic advice is a particular benefit of involving local Citizens Advice in referral services.

Working with health practitioners - developing relationships with health partners took a long time and required sustained input from senior managers. Respiratory nurses, who often see at first hand the cold conditions their patients endure, were particularly willing to engage and were a good source of referrals. Whilst GPs often did not have time to participate in referral pathways, we found that other staff in GP surgeries such as care coordinators were enthusiastic participants. We received ringing endorsement of our service from referral partners, as illustrated by the following feedback:

“Since receiving help (from Citizens Advice), the quality of life for patients has greatly improved”

¹ The external evaluation, carried out by the Centre for Sustainable Energy, is available [here](#).

The Gloucester pilot office has now received funding from the Better Care Fund to take referrals from all health care professionals within the Gloucester and district area.

Other local Citizens Advice housing and health referral services

Warm and Well in North Yorkshire is coordinated by Citizens Advice Mid-North Yorkshire and funded by North Yorkshire Council. Citizens Advice Mid-North Yorkshire provides a comprehensive referral service, as recommended by NICE, and is widely promoted by local health service providers, local councils, Home Improvement Agencies and other local charities.

Warmth for wellbeing was a comprehensive referral service coordinated by Brighton and Hove Citizens Advice. The project included a shared online referral system which allowed a single step assessment and secure sharing of data between partners. An independent evaluation of the project found:

“Clients regaining a sense of control over their domestic environment, finances and care that fundamentally improved their wellbeing.”

We developed two toolkits to help local authorities and health trusts tackle fuel poverty

We always wanted other local Citizens Advice to learn from the experiences of the winter resilience pilot, so we developed a toolkit to help do this. We subsequently collaborated with Cornwall Council to develop two further toolkits, commissioned by BEIS.

One toolkit helps local authorities, health and third-sector partners work together to support fuel poor and vulnerable households. The other toolkit provides guidance on developing cold home referral services, so that health professionals can identify and refer patients who are vulnerable to cold-related ill health.



The toolkits are available at:

www.citizensadvice.org.uk/cold-homes-toolkit/

Recommendations in full

We want all people vulnerable to cold-related ill health, and front-line workers who support them, to have access to a local housing and health referral service. For this to happen, we recommend:

- 1. All local authorities and local health agencies should work with voluntary sector agencies, like Citizens Advice, to provide a housing and health referral services in accordance with [NICE guideline NG6](#).** The voluntary sector is a vital resource in this service model and strong partnership working is key. Warm & Well in North Yorkshire is a good example of such an arrangement.
- 2. Providing support to the most vulnerable population is key to alleviating winter pressure on health services.** NHS Trusts should work with CCG commissioners and local authorities to prioritise housing and health referral services for more vulnerable people by focussing on key health pathways.
- 3. Public Health England should work with national partners, including NHS England and relevant government departments,** to establish a national oversight and review mechanism for monitoring implementation of NG6 and promote good practice.

4. **Local authorities and health agencies should consult the [Cold Home Toolkits](#)** for practical guidance on how to set up a housing and health referral service and tackle fuel poverty in their area. This is available on the Citizens Advice website.
5. **Local authorities and health agencies should work together to provide adequate and sustainable resources** for housing and health referral services. Many people vulnerable to ill health from cold homes and unaffordable fuel bills have complex needs, requiring skilled case workers and often home visits.

For information on how Citizens Advice can help develop or participate in local housing and health referral services, contact:

WRproject@citizensadvice.org.uk

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We help people overcome their problems and campaign on big issues when their voices need to be heard.

We value diversity, champion equality, and challenge discrimination and harassment.

We're here for everyone.



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