

GreenSquare Resident Inspectors 'Keeping your home warm' Report October 2014

Introduction

On 21st February 2014 the Resident Inspectors met to discuss a new project which would tackle the subject of 'fuel poverty'. We decided to title the project 'Keeping your home warm' as we felt that this would be more acceptable to residents. The group decided to consult Suzanne Wigmore GreenSquare (GS) Welfare Reform Project Manager to get her views (Appendix 5), and we sent a number of questions to the GS 'Energy Advice' team (Appendix 3). We also consulted GS documents on heating, damp and energy advice along with a number of published papers.

The purpose of the inspection was to ascertain if GS are doing what they say they do to help residents, if there is more that can be done to keep heating costs down and to what extent the cost of heating homes is affecting residents.

Methodology

The team compiled and agreed a survey (Appendix 2). We posted this out to residents selected on a random basis on 30th May 2014, with a deadline for return of 16th June 2014. We sent out 200 surveys to residents in Avon and Severn (Wiltshire) and 100 to residents in Isis (Oxfordshire). The Isis team also conducted a telephone survey of Isis residents who had not returned their survey.

In total we received 109 surveys, 63 from residents in the Avon and Severn area and 46 from the Isis area. We also put an invitation in the G2 magazine asking residents to respond to the survey. One questionnaire was returned and one letter with comments. The results of the survey are shown in Appendix 1

After the survey had been sent out we realised that it included a misdirection in Q4, covering the issue of damp and condensation. However, when we looked at the results in Avon and Severn, the respondents went to the next question anyway. The teams in Wiltshire and Oxfordshire took this into consideration when collating the results. Oxfordshire's methodology is outlined in Appendix 4.

Results

Fuel Poverty

- The majority of respondents had gas heating
- electric being second
- night storage being third most used.
- Night storage heating was more prevalent among respondents in Avon and Severn than Isis (16% compared to 2%).
- 52% of respondents said that they had reduced their heating due to high costs (see results for breakdown in Appendix 1).
- 43% had turned their heating off completely.
- 32% had cut down on other expenses such as food or clothing.
- Only 11% said that they had contacted GS about their fuel bills.
- There was a difference in satisfaction with the advice given by GreenSquare across the group: 75% satisfaction in Isis and 50% in Avon and Severn. However, only a small number of respondents, 12, had sought advice from GS which is perhaps too few to draw clear conclusions about the quality of advice.

- Only five respondents had oil heating and one of these said they had no problems as they budgeted during the year.
- Only 3% of respondents had not paid an energy bill and 6% had gone into arrears.
- A significant proportion, 8%, said that their energy supplier had switched them to a prepayment card or key meter to help pay their outstanding bill. 20% had switched their energy supplier.

Damp and mould

- 32% of respondents said that they had damp or mould in their homes and, of these, 69% had contacted GS about the problem.
- A substantial proportion, 75%, of those who had contacted GS did not feel that GS had sorted out the problem for them.
- 83% were not happy with the advice given by GS (scoring 1-3 on a 1-5 scale).

There is a significant difference across the GS group with more residents experiencing problems with damp in Avon and Severn (36%) compared to Isis (26%) although dissatisfaction with advice given was consistent across all areas. Further investigation is required. One person voiced the opinion that night storage heating is inefficient and ineffectual and another that it is time to change night storage for gas.

Impact of fuel costs on residents with children

The inspectors in Isis analysed the survey results further to assess the impact of fuel costs on families with children, The findings of the survey in Isis provide evidence that the cost of fuel has a disproportionate impact on GS residents with children, as can be seen in Appendix 6.

Energy advisors

- 28 residents in Isis and 31 in Avon & Severn requested a visit by an energy advisor and we have forwarded their names to the energy advisors

Recommendations

We recommend that:

- 1) More promotion of the energy advice services to be offered by GS.
- 2) More information be given to residents regarding managing damp & mould in their homes.
- 3) GS to approach Energy Providers to get a 'bulk' tariff for residents and possible work with other HAs in the area to get better 'bulk' pricing.
- 4) Customer managers, and other frontline staff, flag up any potential 'cases' of 'fuel poverty' and damp or mould in residents' homes and ensure they are visited by an Energy Advisor and that the outcomes are monitored.
- 5) Energy advisors report back on contacts made as a result of residents requesting a visit when completing this survey.
- 6) GS look at upgrading night storage heating.

- 7) Older properties be visited and assessed for further cavity wall insulation and/or dry lining.
- 8) Persistent damp and mould be investigated thoroughly.
- 9) Affordability checks be carried out pre-tenancy sign up where oil heating is in a property.
- 10) GS should continue to promote how and where residents can access budgeting advice and how to switch tariffs.
- 11) Energy advisors be made aware of the disproportionate impact of the costs of fuel on residents with children and to ensure that the Energy Advice service takes this into account when deciding their service priorities.

List of Appendices

1. Keeping Your Home Warm Survey Results
2. Final Questionnaire
3. Questions to Home Energy Team and Replies
4. Correction Procedure for Residents Survey
5. Suggestions from Suzanne Wigmore
6. Impact of Fuel Costs on Residents with Children