



**Help the Aged**

## **What are the policy implications of Older & Colder?**

This research is the first time in 10 years that older people living in cold homes have been asked about their situation and how they would like to improve it.

Strategies for tackling fuel poverty and cold homes have often failed to take into account the needs and views of those they are supposed to be supporting. The research shows how failures in the design of fuel poverty schemes could mean millions of pounds of Government resources are failing to reach those most in need.

As a result of this research, Help the Aged will be calling for a number of improvements to the way help and advice is delivered by central, national and local government as well as the energy industry:

1. Older people are unaware of the grants available to improve their homes heating and insulation and are confused by the eligibility criteria. Few had heard of Warm Front in England or HEES in Wales, and many were not entitled because their income was a little too high or because they weren't claiming the right benefits. However, Scotland's higher-profile central heating programme with its simpler, age-related criteria was better known, understood and appreciated. **The Scottish scheme should be rolled out in England and Wales.**
2. Many older people are struggling on using old, ineffective and inefficient central heating systems, fearing what will happen when they fail. Warm Front and HEES fails people in this situation by only replacing heating systems after they have broken down – forcing vulnerable people to wait months without any proper heating. The central heating scheme in Scotland is being altered to allow those aged 80 and over to replace partial or inefficient systems even if they are still functioning. **All Government central heating programmes should be able to replace failing or ineffective systems and give priority to those left without heating.**
3. People living off the gas network are amongst the most vulnerable to cold homes – having to pay 40% more for alternative fuels. **Extending the gas network should be a priority in the Government's fuel poverty strategy.**
4. Older people are often using their heating inefficiently and allowing their home to get too cold. Widows, in particular, often admitted to not knowing how to

work their central heating. However, they do not know where to turn to for advice, and when information is provided it can be difficult to understand. **There is a clear need for simple energy advice from trusted sources, such as health and care professionals, targeted particular groups.**

5. Loft insulation is a cheap and effective way of tackling fuel poverty yet many of the most vulnerable pensioners can't access government schemes because clearing the loft is beyond their physical capabilities. Worrying about the mess and disruption was also a common reason given for not applying for help. **Government and industry heating and insulation schemes should offer help with the practicalities, such as clearing lofts, so all can benefit.**
6. Competition amongst energy suppliers should mean that older people can shop around for cheaper or more suitable options. Some did have positive experiences of switching; however, many older people were reluctant to make changes, had negative experiences of switching or found it difficult to compare prices. **The energy industry should improve the way it administers switches and develop simpler energy tariffs that are easier to compare and specifically meet the needs of older people.**

Other issues that the research raises and Government and industry need to consider are:

- Some older people with illnesses such as heart disease and diabetes find it extremely difficult to keep warm and often face very high fuel bills due to keeping their homes at much higher temperatures. Despite this groups vulnerability the fuel poverty strategy fails to take account of their needs.
- A number of older people don't want central heating, believing it makes a home unhealthy and uncomfortable. The strategy should try to address this group's concerns and provide alternatives if necessary.