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Home energy advice services in England: Current state of play and meeting the needs of hard-to-reach and digitally excluded consumers

Research report

Completed by Energy Saving Trust for the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero prior to the general election in the United Kingdom in July 2024. As such, any references to government policies, commitments, or initiatives may reflect the stance of the previous administration and were accurate at the time of fieldwork and writing.

Views expressed in this report are from the relevant research agencies, based on data collected from research participants and other evidence, and not necessarily those of the UK government.



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1 Executive Summary

1.1. Introduction

The Government committed in the Energy Security Strategy that by the summer of 2022, it would launch a comprehensive energy advice service on GOV.UK which would help consumers navigate what can be an unknown territory to improve the energy performance of their homes. Additionally, the Government committed to launch additional support for the hard-to-reach (HTR) and digitally excluded (DE) homeowners through telephone support and local in-person advice.

To support the design and delivery of the phonenumber and local in-person advice provisions, the Government commissioned Energy Saving Trust to conduct research to understand how to effectively deliver an energy advice service to help consumers in England improve the energy performance of their homes. The research aims were to develop a comprehensive understanding of current advice provision across England and to identify the locations, needs and preferences of HTR and DE consumers.

This executive summary details the key findings for each of the research questions proposed. The research questions were answered by a variety of methods, including desk research, secondary data analysis, primary qualitative and quantitative research with energy advice providers, and qualitative research with HTR/DE consumers and organisations who support them.

1.2. Key findings

What is the current home energy advice provision in England?

Energy advice is provided through several mediums, including in-person at local community sites or events (such as drop-ins at local libraries, food banks or advice surgeries), telephone lines, and online channels (websites, videos, and virtual discussions), with many providers trying to use a variety of channels to maximise reach. It was noted that face-to-face and phone contact are often preferred by customers, especially vulnerable customers and those who do not speak English as their first language. Home visits are sometimes offered when appropriate and necessary. The Southeast region has the greatest number of projects that offer in-person advice, either through home visits or other non-home venues, which coincides with the region having the greatest number of energy advice projects. Projects that cover England are more likely to offer advice through telephone and online channels, than in-person as compared to the regional, local (towns and cities), and hyperlocal (neighbourhood-level) projects.

The current economic and cost of living situation, particularly the energy crisis, has seen both an increase in, and a change in demographic of, consumers seeking energy advice. Organisations interviewed in this research reported that people who were already seen as

vulnerable are now in worse positions and seeking further support with their energy costs; in addition, people that may not have previously seen a need for energy advice are now reaching out. As a result, providers have been focusing on providing support to low-income households and vulnerable groups who are increasingly at risk of fuel poverty.¹

Providers offer a range of advice, including energy behavioural tips, advice on understanding bills, and switching tariffs (when this is a viable option), and advice on wider home energy improvements.

Where are the gaps in face-to-face home energy advice provision?

In terms of information provision, many providers reported seeing an increased need for advice on finance and no-cost ways of reducing energy costs, with some noting a demand for instant financial support and access to hardship funds. As a result, most providers are currently offering short-term crisis support, focusing on finances. Fewer providers are focused on longer-term support, such as advice on home retrofit or installation of renewable technology, showing this to be a current gap, despite this being an area where more significant energy cost savings and carbon reductions could be made.

Distribution of energy advice projects is uneven across England: South East England has the greatest number of energy advice projects² (75), considerably greater than other regions, and East of England has the fewest energy advice projects (30).

Who are the HTR/DE consumers in England?

We have produced a consumer segmentation to identify and locate HTR/DE consumers, based on key characteristics like income, disability, urban/rural areas, ethnicity, and housing tenure. The resulting consumer profiles can help target geographical areas for advice provision as well as about the type of advice service required. For example, elderly consumers might prefer to be contacted over the phone, consumers with disabilities could benefit from advice provided in person, and consumers from ethnic minorities could be engaged by translating advice in multiple languages.

Where and how do HTR/DE consumers seek energy advice?

Findings from the qualitative research suggest that HTR/DE consumers seek advice through various channels, depending on their specific circumstances or requirements. Face-to-face and telephone channels are popular amongst older consumers and those who are less familiar with digital technology. However, digital options are preferred by some younger demographics and those with mental health problems such as anxiety who reported that they may prefer to remain anonymous. Consumers tend to seek advice through trusted partners, i.e.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/fuel-poverty-statistics>

² Advice covering financial aspect of energy usage (e.g. bills, tariffs, meters, payment options), energy saving behaviours and tips, and home improvements (e.g. energy efficiency measures, renewables, government support and grant schemes)

organisations that they are familiar with, or those that provide (non-energy related) advice and support to a similar demographic.

What are the key touchpoints for HTR/DE consumers?

Consumers will often firstly seek advice through trusted organisations who support a similar demographic to them, for example charities who support specific disabilities, immigrants, those in or at risk of debt, or older people. They will sometimes rely on friends and family to reach out for them. For many of the organisations, word-of-mouth is a key 'way-in' for consumers, with the organisations being well-known amongst the communities. Social media is another way that consumers may hear about the advice and support being offered, though certain groups, such as older people and DE consumers, will be excluded from this route. Community outreach, e.g. through community or religious groups, is another key touch-point for some more isolated individuals or communities. Referrals were common, with more generic support organisations often referring to other organisations who can give more tailored support, or more specific advice regarding energy.

What information sources do HTR/DE consumers trust?

Many HTR consumers cited their family and peers as trusted sources of information and advice, including referrals and recommendations. Certain HTR groups, and organisations that support them, also referenced the value of trusted connections built through holistic support organisations and charities. Organisations that operate with the sole purpose of providing impartial advice were mostly viewed positively, with some mixed views on advice coming from the government and energy suppliers. Representation tends to build trust, with consumers trusting advice from sources where they can see themselves or their circumstances reflected in those who work there.

What engagement approaches are most effective in supporting people to adopt energy efficiency behaviours and measures?

To support people to take up home energy retrofits and adopt energy efficiency behaviours, capability, opportunity, and motivational factors must all be taken into account. The advice must be presented in an accessible way for consumers, dependent on their needs and requirements. This can be very different for different consumers, and so offering a range of channels increases the opportunity for consumers to engage with support and advice.

Some consumers do not know where or how to seek advice, and so awareness can be raised by doing community outreach, so that consumers know the support exists. Consumers also need to be motivated to seek advice and act on it. To increase motivation, the advice and support must come from trusted sources, ideally impartial organisations, those which the consumer has personal good experience with, or have a positive referral from friends or family. If the consumer sees representatives of their group or community within the organisation, this could also increase trust, as the consumer knows that their needs will have been considered.

When presented with different scenarios for energy advice delivery, home visits were the most preferred option by HTR/DE consumers. Energy café models were generally popular, though

not fully accessible for all groups. Telephone helplines had mixed reviews, with consumers appreciating their flexibility, but having doubts about them meeting their needs in full. Neighbourhood visits were the least popular option, due to a lack of trust in door-knocking, though if done by a trusted organisation, it could reach those who would not otherwise engage.

2. Introduction

2.1. Background

In 2019, the UK government announced a commitment to reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050³, which includes the ambition to significantly cut emissions from the UK's heat and buildings sector. In addition, the 2022 Autumn Statement set out a new target to reduce energy consumption from buildings and industry by 15% by 2030. The provision of effective energy advice to help households understand energy saving measures (including the take-up of home retrofit) is a significant element in the suite of enabling mechanisms required to meet these objectives. To support homeowners to improve the energy efficiency of their properties, the British Energy Security Strategy⁴ has therefore committed to launch a comprehensive energy advice service in England.

In July 2022, the GOV.UK website was launched. However, it was acknowledged that this alone would not be enough, as previous Government market research suggested that the energy advice market is highly fractured, particularly once consumers seek advice beyond digital platforms. In particular, other forms of advice may be essential in certain circumstances; for instance, when dealing with hard-to-treat buildings (where in-person visits would be effective), or when engaging with digitally excluded (DE) or hard-to-reach (HTR) consumer groups who may prefer telephone or in-person advice.

2.2. Research objectives

To support the design and delivery of the phonenumber and local in-person advice provisions, the Government commissioned Energy Saving Trust and Winning Moves to conduct research into the current home energy advice provisions across England and HTR/DE consumers. The five objectives of the research were to:

1. Identify the information being provided via advice services.
2. Identify the methods and modes being used to deliver advice.
3. Map current advice provision and delivery in a comprehensive way.
4. Define HTR consumers in the context of energy advice and comprehensively model and map HTR and DE consumers.

³ The Climate Change Act 2008 (2050 Target Amendment) Order 2019

⁴ British Energy Security Strategy (2022) available online British energy security strategy - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

5. Detail engagement approaches best suited to the preferences of HTR and DE consumers.

This report outlines the complete findings of work conducted between September 2022 and April 2023. Findings from this research will help inform the design and delivery of phonenumber and local in-person advice provisions, especially in reaching HTR and DE consumers.

2.3. Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was taken to answer each of the key research questions as outlined in Table 1. A more detailed description of the methodologies, including the interview topic guides and online survey questionnaires, is provided in Appendix 1.

Table 1: A summary of research questions and methodologies

Research question	Methodology
1. What is the current home energy advice provision in England? 2. Where are the gaps in face-to-face home energy advice provision?	Evidence review, semi-structured interviews with energy advice providers (n = 15), online survey of energy advice providers (n = 47) and further desk research to develop a database of energy advice services in England and to identify a common set of existing advice models with illustrative case studies.
3. Who are the HTR and DE consumers in England?	Secondary data analysis of English Housing Survey (EHS) data to develop a set of consumer profiles and mapping of where they can be found across regions of England, based on hierarchical clustering analysis that groups individual households into clusters based on their similarity.
4. Where and how do HTR and DE consumers seek energy advice? 5. What are the key touchpoints for HTR and DE consumers? 6. What information sources do HTR and DE consumers trust? 7. What are the most effective engagement approaches to support adoption of energy efficiency behaviours and measures	Online workshops with advice providers (n = 6), specialist interviews with organisations that provide advice and support to HTR, vulnerable and/or DE customers but not specifically energy related (n = 5), interviews with HTR and DE consumers (n = 80) and deliberative workshops with HTR and DE consumers to collect qualitative information for exploring advice-seeking behaviour and most effective engagement methods using COM-B model.

3. Findings

3.1. Current advice provision

To understand the current state of home energy advice provision across England, a database of energy advice projects⁵ was created using data outlined in Table 1. The database fields include types of advice, delivery channels, geographical coverage and targeted consumer groups (if any). A total of 236 energy advice projects were identified, delivered by 141 organisations,⁶ most of which were charities (63%). This section outlines the main findings and trends from the analysis of the database, complemented with the more in-depth, qualitative information elicited from the informant interviews and online survey of energy advice providers.

3.1.1. Geographical coverage

Distribution of energy advice projects is uneven across England. The South East region has the greatest number of energy advice projects (75), as it also has the most local and hyperlocal projects among the regions (Figure 1). East of England has the fewest energy advice projects (34). The rest of the regions have between 41 and 54 energy advice projects.⁷

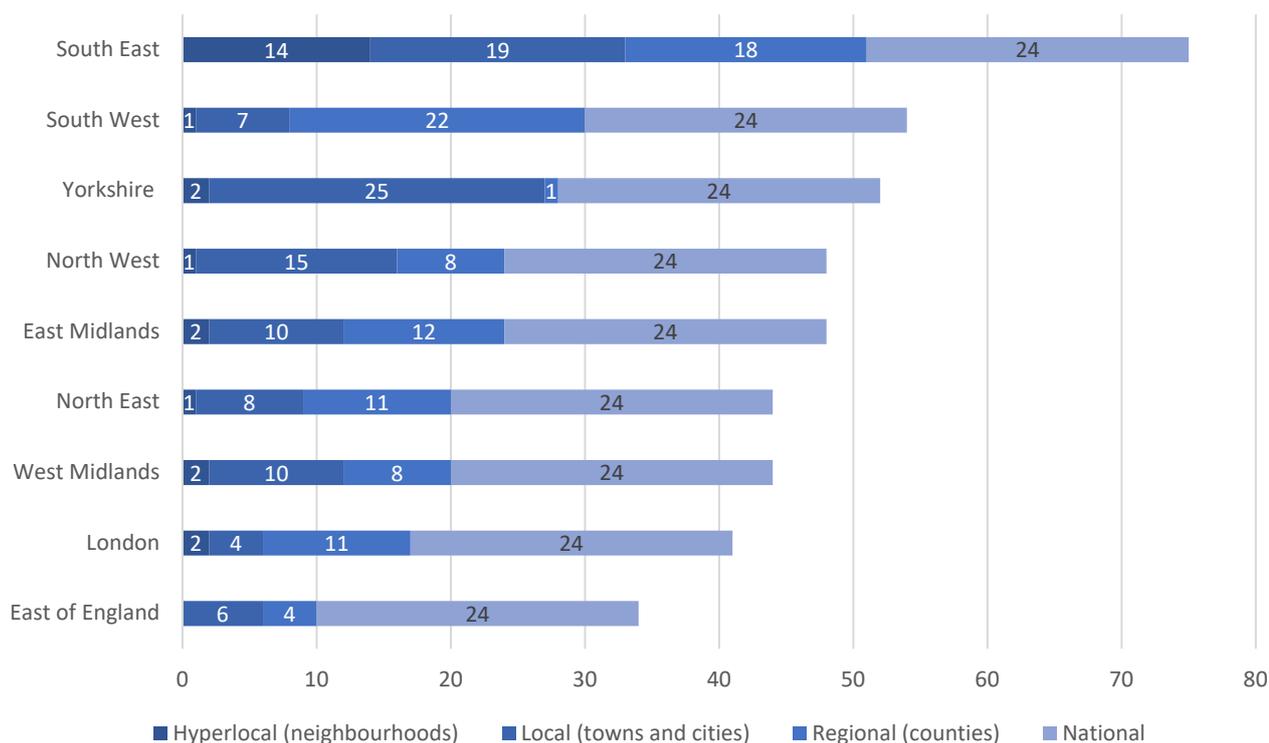
Some energy advice projects are delivered as part of a partnership, rather than by a single organisation. It was noted in the interviews with energy advice providers that being part of a local network of support is considered important. One provider from the South West reported working with 120 local organisations and commented, *“we’re fortunate to have a number of organisations that talk to one another”*. Another provider from the West Midlands confirmed that *“for tailored [energy] advice services [we] go through local branding where possible”* and noted the importance of *“joining the dots in localities”*.

Despite the importance of joined-up services, there was consensus among interviewees that energy advice provision in England is *“patchy”, “hit and miss”, “reactive”, “insufficient”* and *“a postcode lottery”*.

⁵ Advice covering financial aspect of energy usage (e.g. bills, tariffs, meters, payment options), energy saving behaviours and tips, and home improvements (e.g. energy efficiency measures, renewables, government support and grant schemes)

⁶ 35% of the organisations were delivering more than one energy advice. For some organisations, it was not possible to distinguish the different energy advice projects they deliver based on the information provided in their website. In this case, they were counted as one under the organisation name. Therefore, the percentage could be higher.

⁷ It is worth noting that development of the database relied on certain data sources, in particular Redress scheme, British Gas Saving Trust and Community Energy South, therefore is non-exhaustive. Information elicited through desk-based research is also not as detailed or accurate as those provided by participants of semi-structured interviews and online survey.

Figure 1: Number of home energy advice projects by region

3.1.2. Types of advice

Overall, current advice provision has a greater focus on finance (i.e. energy bills and cost savings) and wellbeing, and less focus on climate mitigation and carbon reductions. Eighty-five per cent of energy advice focuses on community and social welfare (e.g. fuel poverty, financial and wellbeing support) whilst 45% has an environmental focus (climate, net zero transition, ecology).⁸

The most common types of advice provided were financial advice in energy supply (for example, payment options and switching tariffs) (75%) and energy saving behaviours and tips (74%) (Figure 2). Advice categorised as “other” included advice on condensation and mould, carbon monoxide, water efficiency and debt/ finance. Most projects offered personalised advice (87%), with a small number of projects providing generic advice only (22%).^{9 10}

Advice providers who were interviewed stated that they had seen an increased need for financial advice and advice on no-cost ways of reducing energy costs, with some noting a demand for instant financial support and access to hardship funds. This is reflected in the database, where the following types of support were found to be offered in addition to energy advice; signposting to other available support or grant funding (64%), referral to other relevant

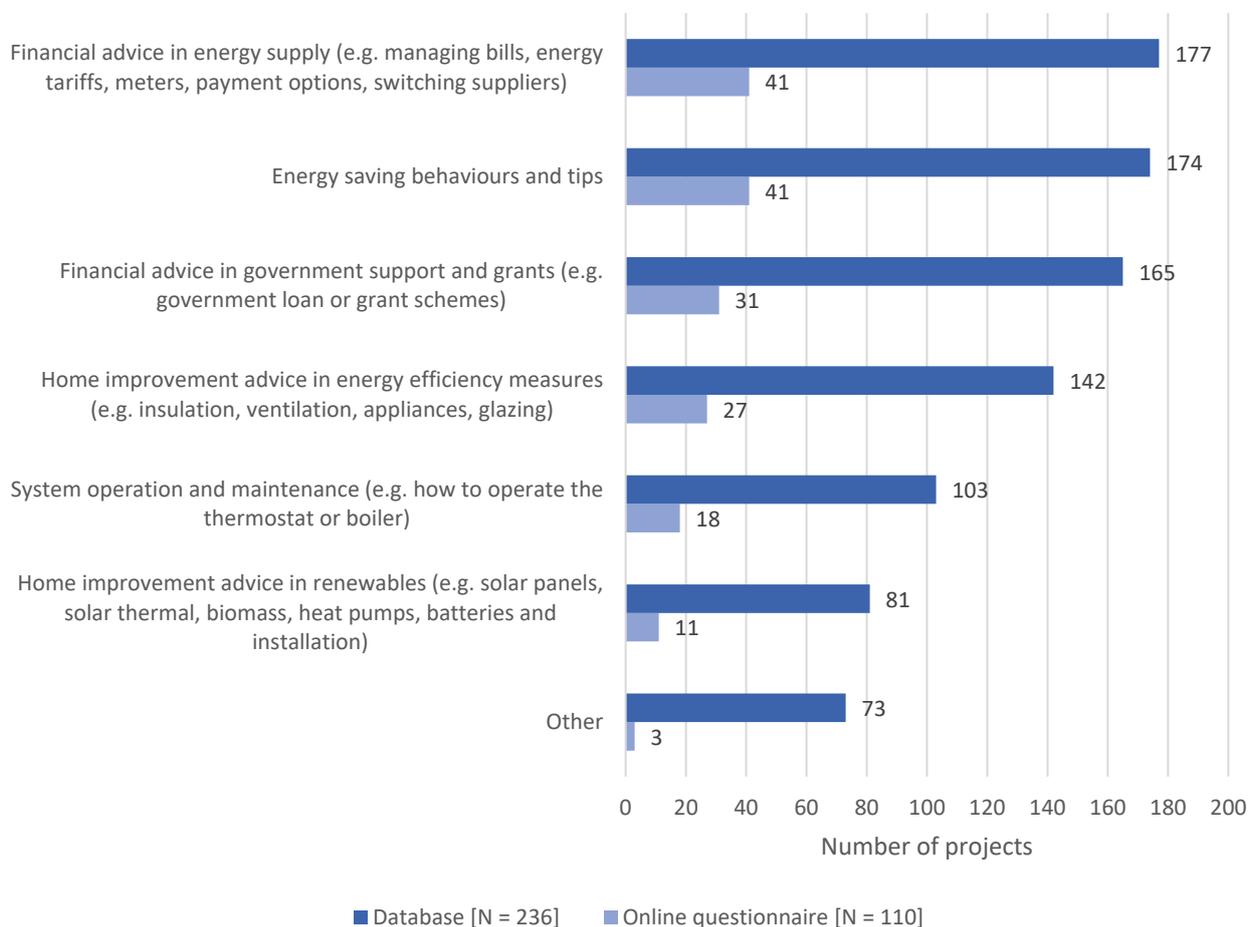
⁸ Some have two objectives, social and environmental, therefore the percentages add up to over 100%.

⁹ Generic energy advice is advice that is available and scripted. Generic energy advice is advice that is available and scripted.

¹⁰ For one provider, it was not possible to ascertain from their website whether they provide generic or personalised advice.

support or grant funding (48%), financial support for energy bills (e.g. fuel vouchers) (43%), and financial support for energy efficiency and/or renewables (e.g. loans or grant funding) (31%).

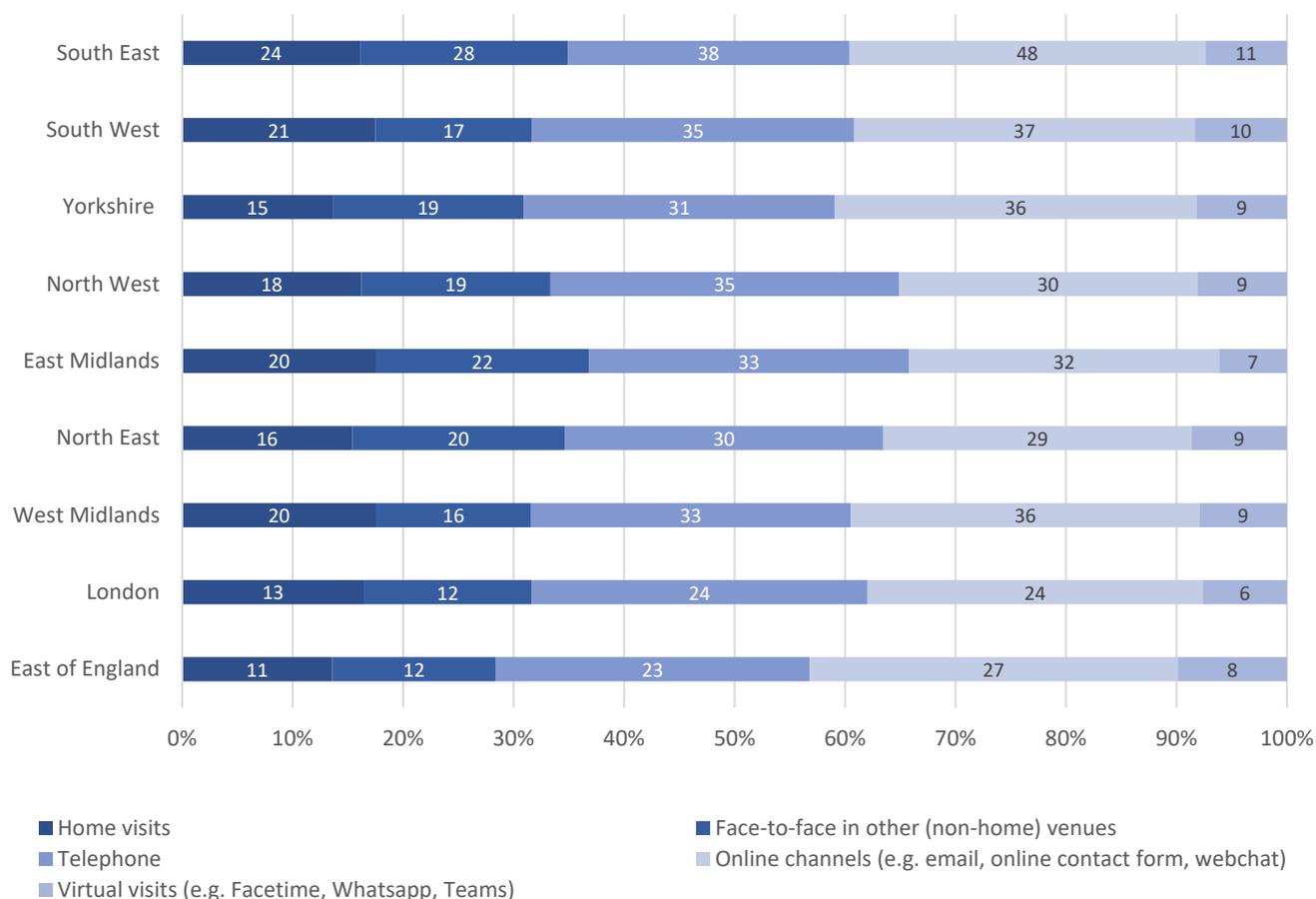
Figure 2: Types of advice offered



3.1.3. Channels for advice provision

Most of the projects delivered advice through telephone (66%), followed by online channels (63%), face-to-face at non-home venues (55%), home visits (45%), and virtual visits (21%). The South East had the greatest number of projects that offered in-person advice, either through home visits or other non-home venues. This coincides with the region having the greatest number of energy advice projects (Section 3.1.1).

Advice providers interviewed stated that they tried to use a variety of channels to have the largest reach. However, it was noted that face-to-face and phone contact was often preferred by customers, especially vulnerable customers and those who do not speak English as a first language. Home visits were sometimes offered when appropriate and necessary.

Figure 3: Channels of advice provision by regions¹¹

3.1.4. Target customers

Although the organisations generally do not turn away people who approach them for advice, 58% of the projects were targeted at specific customer groups. Key customer groups that they targeted include: people in fuel poverty (39%), on low incomes (35%), or in/at risk of debt (28%), disabled people (25%), older people (25%), people with long-term physical/ mental health conditions (23%), people experiencing mental health problems (22%), carers (17%), people with limited access to technology (16%), people from/belonging to minority ethnic groups (16%), and tenants (15%).

Advice providers interviewed reported that, given the cost-of-living crisis, they had been focusing on providing support to low-income households and vulnerable groups who are increasingly at risk of fuel poverty (Models 1 and 4, see below),¹² and deprioritising carbon reduction and retrofitting advice to the able-to-pay market (Models 2 and 3).

¹¹ The numbers do not add up to the total presented in Figure 1 as some energy advice projects use multiple channels for advice provision.

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/fuel-poverty-statistics>

Use of other languages to provide advice is generally limited. Of the 110 energy advice projects captured in the online survey, 80% were delivered in English only.¹³ 16% said they used translation services, therefore could accommodate any language requirements.

3.1.5. Advice models

Informed by the key characteristics of advice services, five advice models have been developed (see Table 2 for a summary of the models). The advice models describe the common set of advice services being provided, to help understand the nature of current advice provision. The models were appended to each of the energy advice projects in the database to identify the most common advice provision and any gaps in the existing provision.

An analysis of the energy advice projects database showed most of the current projects focused on providing advice and support to customers struggling with their energy bills, and vulnerable and low-income customers (Model 1 and 4). Fewer projects provided advice on making more substantial home improvements to reduce energy consumptions and carbon emissions in the long-term (Model 2 and 3). Whilst a small proportion of projects solely provided generic energy advice (Model 5), this was also offered as a secondary feature within most of the other projects. Overall, the current focus on short-term energy crisis resolutions could mean delays in implementing the larger and more costly energy efficiency measures and renewable technologies to lower energy bills and reduce carbon emissions in the long-term.

Table 2: Advice models and their key characteristics

Model	Characteristics	Percentage of projects in database
Model 1: Energy crisis relief for customers struggling to pay their bills	<p>Personalised advice on energy suppliers and bills.</p> <p>Financial support to pay off fuel debts, such as fuel vouchers, charitable grants or ongoing payment plans.</p> <p>Referral and support with applications to benefits or grants.</p> <p>Generic or personalised advice on energy saving tips and behavioural change.</p>	36%
Model 2: Retrofit support and empowerment for low-income and	Home assessment to provide personalised advice on how to improve the property's energy performance.	9%

¹³ Information regarding languages in which advice are provided was mostly absent from desk-based research, therefore was only captured through the online survey of energy advice providers.

Model	Characteristics	Percentage of projects in database
vulnerable customers	<p>Referral and support to apply for grants to retrofit their home and improve energy efficiency.</p> <p>Support throughout the retrofitting process and post-installation to ensure the customer's needs are met.</p>	
Model 3: Green home transition support for the able-to-pay customers	<p>Generic or personalised advice on energy, energy efficiency and low-carbon technologies, their pros and cons.</p> <p>Referral or signposting to available grant funding (the same organisation could be administering the grant scheme).</p> <p>Recommended retrofit contractors or suppliers.</p>	12%
Model 4: Energy support facilitation by wider services for low-income and vulnerable customers	<p>Generic energy advice embedded in existing services to specific groups, such as elderly, disabled and/or other vulnerable groups.</p> <p>Referral to local authorities and/or other agencies for further advice or support.</p>	35%
Model 5: Energy support hubs for all customers	<p>Generic energy advice and signposting to available support or grants.</p> <p>Filtering questions or online self-assessment tool to direct people to the relevant advice and support.</p>	8%

3.2. HTR and DE consumers

To build an understanding of HTR and DE consumers, their characteristics and where they are, consumer profiling was conducted using the three most recent years of EHS data. Over 250 variables were reviewed, and a subset of fields that were indicative of HTR and DE consumers' characteristics were selected. They included household age, income, employment status, ethnicity, composition, illness/disability, tenure, deprivation, and rurality. Then, secondary analysis was conducted to segment and locate HTR and DE consumers in England.

Consumer profiling, alongside the qualitative research with consumers (which findings are presented in Section 3.3) will help inform the design and delivery of the telephone advice service and the local demonstrators to ensure reach of HTR and DE consumers.

3.2.1. Consumer profiles

A total of ten consumer profiles were identified from the analysis. A brief description of each consumer profile is presented in Table 3, focusing on some of the key characteristics within each group that distinguish them the most from the average EHS household.

Table 3: Summary description of HTD/DE consumer profiles based on EHS data

Consumer profile	Description
1 – Minorities in urban deprived areas	Younger householders, Black or from ethnic minorities other than Asian, living in mostly deprived areas, overcrowded households, low unemployment rates, living in cities.
2 – Asians in deprived urban areas	Younger householders, Asian, living in mostly deprived areas, multiple children, low unemployment rates, living in cities, mostly homeowners or private renters, overcrowded households.
3 – Young renters in urban areas	Young householders, low unemployment rates, living in urban areas, private renters.
4 – Deprived in urban social housing	Living in mostly deprived areas in urban settings, low unemployment rates, dwelling in social housing.
5 – Wealthy seniors in urban areas	Senior householders, high adjusted incomes, living in urban areas, homeowners.
6 – Rural wealthy homeowners	High adjusted incomes, living in smaller towns and rural areas, mostly homeowners.
7 – Low-income unemployed and disabled	Low adjusted incomes, in receipt of disability benefits, living in mostly deprived areas, high unemployment rates, dwelling in social housing.
8 – Young low-income renters in deprived areas	Young householders, low adjusted incomes, living in mostly deprived areas, multiple children, private renters.

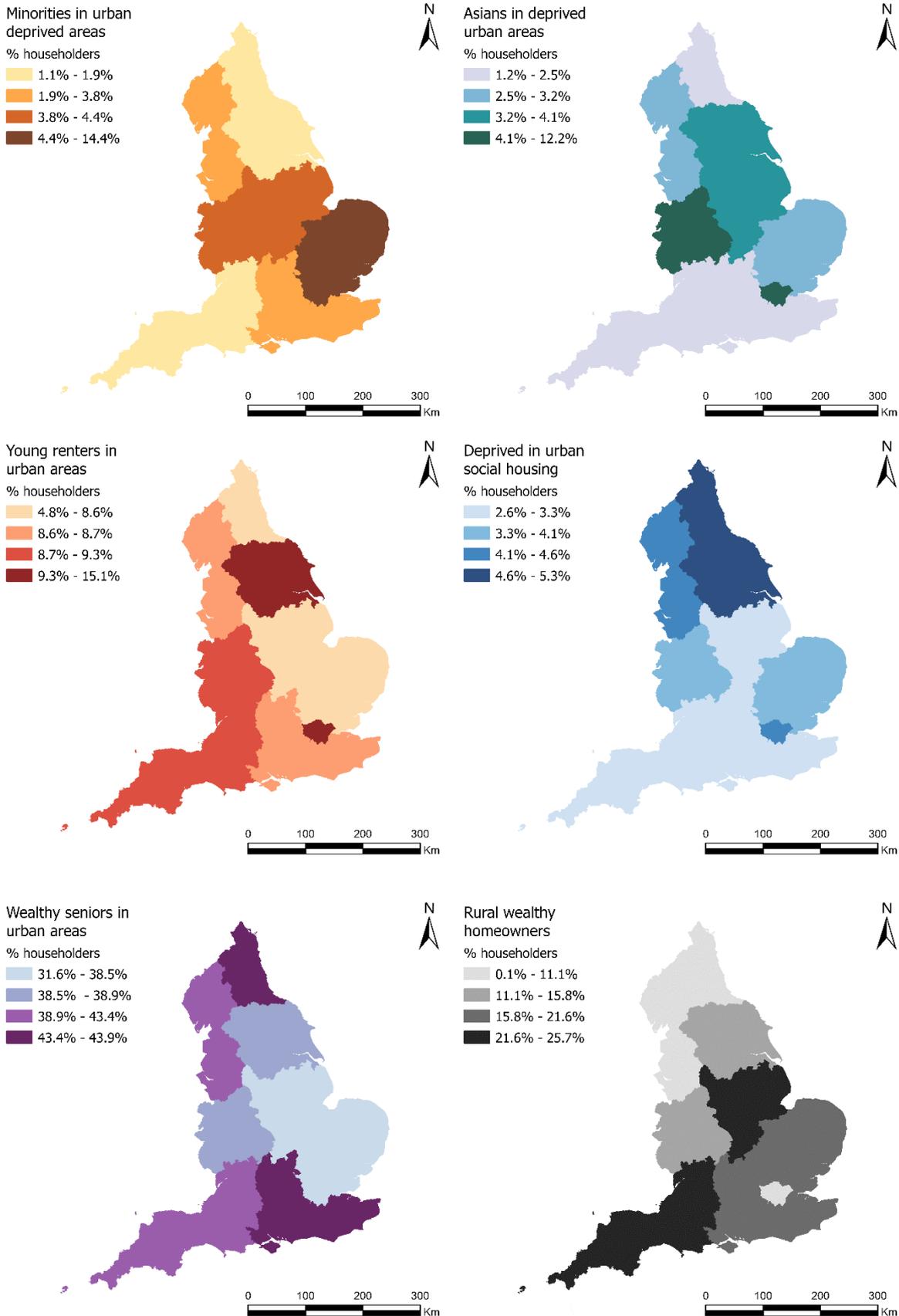
Consumer profile	Description
9 – Disabled non-working seniors	Senior householders, in receipt of disability benefits, no dependent children, mostly unemployed or inactive, homeowners.
10 – Low-income disabled minorities in social housing	Younger householders, low adjusted incomes, entirely from ethnic minorities, in receipt of disability benefits, living in mostly deprived areas in urban settings, multiple children, mostly dwelling in social housing, overcrowded households.

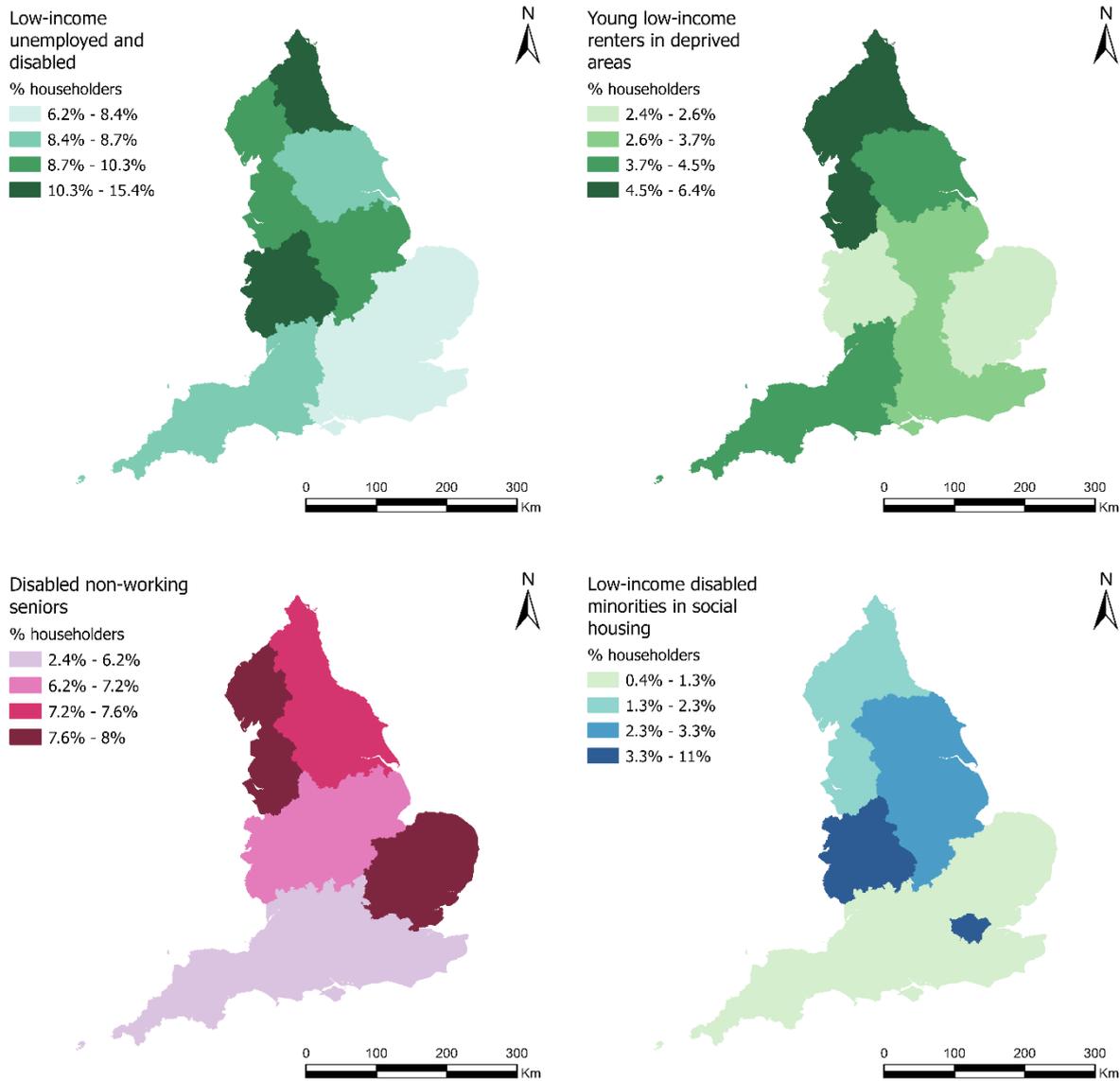
The ten EHS consumer profiles can help target geographical areas as well as the type of advice service required. For example, based on their disability characteristics, consumer profiles 7, 9 and 10 could be consumers with limited mobility, vision impairment or mental health conditions, and might be unable to access digital advice through portable devices. These groups could benefit from being reached in person at home or through alternative channels, such as audio and braille versions of written media. However, targets can change drastically based on the type of advice and delivery strategy. For example, advice that is tailored to the elderly might be delivered in person or over the phone and could be targeted to consumers in profile 8, whose members are senior homeowners. Alternatively, online energy advice translated in multiple languages could be targeted to profiles 1, 2 and 10, where a higher proportion of consumers identify as ethnic minorities.

3.2.2. Geographical distribution of HTR and DE consumers

The results from the clustering analysis on EHS data were extrapolated for all households in England and used to create maps showing how each profile is distributed across households within each region in the country, as shown in Figure 4 below. These maps can be used as a tool to develop strategies to reach different consumers within specific regions of England. For example, households mostly in deprived areas tend to be found in the more northern parts of the country, like the North East and Yorkshire and The Humber. Ethnic minorities tend to be found more commonly in London, the East of England and the West Midlands, while the South West and the East Midlands tend to host a considerable percentage of homeowners in rural settings.

Figure 4: Maps of each household profile prevalence across English regions, based on the EHS model





3.3. Understanding and engaging HTR/DE consumers

To better understand how to effectively engage and deliver home energy advice to HTR and DE consumers, energy advice providers, organisations that support vulnerable consumers, and HTR and DE consumers themselves were consulted through a mixture of workshops and interviews (see Table 1). This section outlines the key findings from these workshops and interviews.

3.3.1. Catalysts for seeking advice

Interview and workshop participants noted several reasons that prompted consumers to seek advice. The main reasons are as summarised below.

Reacting in response to a problem. HTR consumers have predominantly sought advice in response to a problem; for example, when they experienced something that needed fixing in

the home. One participant in the energy advice provider workshop also highlighted that the “*start of the boiler season*” generally increased demand as people discovered that their boilers were not working. This reactionary advice-seeking was evident both with general advice and with more energy specific issues. As such, HTR and DE consumers do not tend to proactively seek advice; this is namely due to competing priorities and a lack of time or headspace: “*I don’t have enough time because I work nights and I have to sleep in the day. Sometimes I do agency [work] as well just to help me make a bit extra to make my bills*”.

Change in circumstances. Participants in the workshop and specialist provider interviews also reported that consumers sought advice in response to a change in personal circumstances, such as bereavement or the loss of a job. This extends beyond energy advice, with different groups having sought advice at different “*moments of change*”. For some groups, this could have been new caring responsibilities, being new to the country (including refugees and asylum seekers), families being relocated due to domestic abuse, and younger people beginning to live independently, particularly those with disadvantaged backgrounds such as those leaving care.

When experiencing financial difficulties. In the consumer interviews, HTR consumers reported seeking advice when experiencing financial difficulties. Individuals from low-income households were more likely to cite financial difficulties as a catalyst to seeking support. This is especially prevalent in the context of energy advice, given recent price increases. The specialist debt support participant reported that financial difficulties were becoming more common. The average income of those who had sought debt advice had increased over the past year, reflecting that the current cost-of-living crisis is hitting those who previously would not have been at risk of debt.

A lack of knowledge or understanding. Concern around finances was frequently coupled with a lack of knowledge and understanding around the current energy landscape. Others had more specific questions: e.g., “*Understanding smart readers [meters] is quite hard sometimes*”; “[*Advice on*] *how the bill gets increased, will it make any difference if we turn down the radiator in just my room*”. Comprehension was identified as being particularly relevant to certain HTR groups, namely non-native English speakers and people living with disabilities.

Providers in the workshop also felt that low reading ages and a lack of financial education were affecting the approach to providing advice and were also a factor in people needing support. Difficulties with comprehension led individuals to seek help in understanding communications sent by their energy supplier, in particular among non-native English speakers and some individuals who struggle with reading. Where possible, individuals will seek support from family and friends with translation and comprehension, which could result in young children becoming involved in complex decision-making surrounding energy.

Within the Deaf community, it was reported by the specialist Deaf charity that written English comprehension levels are low, and so receiving written communications from energy suppliers (or other services, such as medical appointments or benefits letters) has lead customers to seek interpretation support from specialist Deaf charities. Likewise, a charity supporting Eastern European immigrants reported that the need for interpretation of letters and

communication from the council or utilities was a catalyst for customers seeking support from them.

3.3.2. Where and how do they seek advice?

In general, HTR consumers were found to be quite reliant on others for support or advice. When addressing a problem, the extent to which individuals engage with external organisations for support varies, with a tendency for some HTR consumers to rely more on family and friends for support, and others to access services and organisations that they are already familiar with. The connection between the two is 'trust', a result of familiarity.

Family and friends. Not only do HTR consumers rely on friends, family and support organisations to assist them with accessing services, the deliberative workshops found that HTR consumers would discuss any advice they had been given with them and seek their view on what to do next.

External support organisations. For those living in more isolated circumstances, or when an issue is considered more serious, external support organisations and the local council are called upon to provide more specific support. For customers in debt, seeking support from a debt support organisation can be a last resort.

Other factors that influenced the likelihood of HTR consumers reaching out to external advice organisations included physical accessibility and having had previous positive experiences. As a result, the primary choice of external organisation for support is personal and/or circumstantial, not necessarily based on the organisation's brand or offer.

Holistic support services. Several HTR/DE respondents were active users of holistic support services, including charities and local churches. Support provided in these settings was more general: social spaces, support groups, and connection to peers with shared experiences. This tends to be a general source of support rather than a one-off interaction and many users of these services emphasised their importance in their daily lives.

There was some evidence that HTR consumers approach a support organisation for a specific need but are also able to access help and advice on other matters. In some cases, where the organisation provided it, this included energy saving advice, e.g. "*I approached them for help, I heard there was a food bank [...] they asked what else I needed and I mentioned [...] my bills*".

3.3.3. Types of advice sought

The types of advice sought by HTR consumers generally aligns with the catalysts identified above, and is summarised below:

Home maintenance. Whilst renters were able to defer to their landlord or housing association support worker for repairs, renovation and maintenance work, homeowners reported reliance on tradesmen who they, or trusted peers, had previously had positive experiences with. Rural homeowners mentioned the difficulty of finding trusted workmen when availability is scarce.

This was especially true if the renovation was perceived to be a specialist job, such as implementing energy efficiency measures.

Finance / cost of living. Several HTR consumers, typically those on low incomes or in receipt of benefits, had made attempts to access support to help with the increased cost of living. Examples included vouchers for food and energy bills that could be acquired through local advice centres, food banks facilitated at local churches and similar venues, and grants to help with bills. This form of support was sought mostly by individuals living at crisis point, though as noted by the debt support charity, an increasing number of customers not typically perceived as vulnerable, could now fall into this category.

Comprehension, translation and digital support. HTR consumers also mentioned seeking support with comprehension and use of digital services, both from trusted peers and external organisations. Comprehension support nominally involved help with reading and explaining letters and other communications sent by councils or energy suppliers. Some organisations offered support to DE consumers who did not have internet access at home. Some DE consumers had also sought courses on digital literacy to help them access advice, information, and services online with greater ease.

Energy advice. Some HTR consumers had actively sought energy advice. This included attending talks or watching television shows on tips to reduce energy. Organisation that supports older people also reported that there had been an increased volume of calls relating to energy concerns, high bills and keeping warm; though customers were mainly seeking crisis support rather than longer-term energy saving support.

Energy advice providers (through the workshop) discussed different types of energy advice sought by consumers. The main themes are as follows:

Bills and usage. This included seeking reassurance that charges and bills were correct, understanding meters and checking their accuracy, and asking for support with billing disputes. Participants noted that changes of supplier, and experiences of choosing a supplier or going through the Supplier of Last Resort (SoLR) process¹⁴ can cause confusion and were factors in this type of advice. Participants noted that while switching to a cheaper tariff may be a driver in customers seeking advice, assistance with switching is rarely an option currently.

Government support. Some consumers are aware that there is support available and seek information on what is available and how to access it. Participants also highlighted reports of people underclaiming the fuel vouchers available for consumers on metered supplies.

Debts, restructuring and accessing manageable debt. Most participants who spoke about debt did so in general terms, suggesting that energy debt could be part of individuals' wider financial concerns. However, one participant made specific reference to energy suppliers' duties to offer repayment plans but added "*we also know that not all are proactive with having this conversation...*"

¹⁴ <https://www.ofgem.gov.uk/news-and-views/blog/how-youre-protected-when-energy-firms-collapse>

Reducing energy usage. Seeking low and no cost ways to reduce usage and thereby saving money.

Using heating systems. Participants also reported supporting customers with how to operate their heating or deal with system breakdowns.

Understanding UK energy supply and customer billing systems. This is a particular issue for those new to the country, including those who have not previously needed to pay for energy.

3.3.4. What information sources do consumers trust?

As discussed above, HTR consumers trust their family and peers, and the holistic support organisations that they have built connections with.

With regards to trusting external organisations, markers of trust included:

Being a recognised authority. E.g., the local authority, (*“It is something we know, it isn’t just something that has popped up”; “If the letters are coming from the Borough, it’s a voice that we respect.”*)

Having positive experiences. (*“I trust them because I’ve used the service and they did a good job and what they said they were going to do is exactly what they did.”*)

Referrals from trusted peers. (*“Everyone I know who has gone there, including my daughter, they’ve always been there for them and always give them good advice.”*)

Impartiality. There was consensus amongst HTR consumers that trusted sources are often, if not always, completely impartial. For non-native English speakers in particular, organisations that provided translation to augment their support services were referenced.

Not for profit. When asked what qualities they would like to see in a new energy advice service, HTR consumers noted the importance of not being profit-driven. Reflections on past negative interactions with government schemes, energy suppliers and outsourced commercial contractors resulted in fears of being mis-sold a product and concerns that vulnerable individuals could be taken advantage of.

Employees that the consumer can relate to. Having representatives of different consumers working within organisations can help to build trust as people can see themselves represented and thus feel understood, as noted by the specialist provider supporting Eastern European people and a social enterprise supporting disabled people. It was noted this could be useful for an energy advice service, particularly where practical support is needed. For example, if a customer with a visual impairment wanted to install a device, they would have confidence that the device was fully accessible if the agent also had a visual impairment.

Trust of the UK government brand and of energy suppliers was overall mixed. While some workshop participants felt the government could be trusted, others felt more comfortable using organisations where *“they’re not affiliated with any government agencies or the government*

themselves". Similarly, some participants felt that energy suppliers were trustworthy and helpful, whilst others felt a lack of trust when it came to their suppliers or had had bad experiences.

Trust also emerged as a strong theme within the energy advice providers workshop, where providers reported an observed reduction in trust in current systems and energy suppliers. They also discussed a range of factors that they felt were important in building and maintaining trust, some of which reflect the points made above regarding 'markers' of trust, including referrals from trusted partners and not for profit status. Other points mentioned were:

Locally based advice provision. Participants observed that customers feel detached from England-wide services and anticipate a less personalised approach, saying *"am I just going to go through it, be processed rather than listened to?"*

Integrated services. A clearly managed customer journey was also emphasised to ensure that people *"don't fall through the cracks."*

Quality of user journey. Getting it *"right first time"* was seen as crucial. This includes managing customer expectations about the support available and ensuring that users are effectively directed to advice that is appropriate for their needs and circumstances. They spoke of ensuring that any future services include an *"advice funnel"* to enable effective and efficient advice service provision. This has direct implications for digital services, covered in more detail below.

Telephone service. Most participants saw maintaining a telephone service as particularly important and had maintained theirs while other local services were closed (including due to COVID).

3.3.5. Barriers to seeking advice (including digital inclusion)

HTR consumers disclosed a variety of barriers at different stages of the customer journey when seeking general advice, which may include energy-related advice.

Where and how to seek advice. Many HTR respondents struggle with knowing where and how to seek advice. Previous attempts led to back and forth within and between organisations: *"I don't trust them when they don't help or keep sending you to different places"*. This negatively impacts motivation to seek further advice. This mostly impacts those on lower income, in receipt of benefits, non-native English speakers, people living with disabilities, and the digitally excluded. This was reflected in the specialist advice interviews, where it was noted that immigrants may not know how the systems in the UK work, and thus not know where to go. For Deaf people, this problem can be amplified by the fact that passive "absorption" of information via TV, radio and newspaper or social media, is not as easy, leading to a lack of awareness of issues such as the energy crisis, and where to go for support. This was also found in other HTR groups with additional needs, such as those with cognitive impairments.

Being at crisis point. Some respondents referenced being at crisis point as a barrier to seeking advice. Consumers in crisis had other priorities that came first and were not in a

position to engage with energy advice. Energy advice providers in the workshop felt that some customers delay seeking help as they are overwhelmed by the extent of their problems and the effort it might take to resolve them.

Lack of time. Customers with caring responsibilities and full-time work may lack time to seek support or have it as a lower priority. Full-time work was identified as a potential emerging issue as the demographics of those seeking advice is changing. Some providers reported experimenting with adjusting hours to offer evening appointments. However, HTR consumers in the deliberative workshops said that evenings would not be convenient for them either due to caring responsibilities and / or needing time to rest.

Fear of negative consequences. Consumers on a lower income and in receipt of benefits also discussed how fear of negative consequences had deterred them from seeking the support they needed: e.g., *“I worry about my children being in jeopardy. There’s a risk of social services getting involved if people know I am in debt and struggling”*. For some, these fears were realised: *“When I told them what I owe, they stopped my credit card”*. A few even mentioned feeling embarrassed to admit they needed help. The charity supporting older people also reported that embarrassment, and not wanting to be a *“burden”* was a barrier they often encounter.

Cold engagement. With regards to advertising advice, the consensus was that cold engagement was particularly disliked: *“I can’t do with cold calling because half the time it’s nothing you want [...] If you’re older and on your own, it can be quite intimidating”*. A couple of respondents had fallen victim to scams and door-knocking salesman that had resulted in them losing money; these experiences were more typical of groups with lower educational attainment and/or non-native English speakers. Negative experiences damage trust, and the ability to discern who can be trusted. None of the providers interviewed in this research took this approach, however.

Language difficulties. Several respondents referenced language difficulties when trying to engage with advice. This was the case for non-native English speakers who struggle with telephone calls (*“It is easier to understand it in face-to-face than the phone”*) or cannot communicate without a translator (*“Sometimes they don’t provide an interpreter, so I have to stop coming”*).

It was noted by the charities that interpretation needs to go beyond simply translating the words, for example making sure it is culturally appropriate. For Deaf people, writing bullet points is not an adequate replacement for proper British Sign Language interpretation; but is often resorted to when companies don’t have interpreters readily available, and the issue requires swift resolution. However, this can be an unsatisfactory experience for the customer and may deter them from seeking support again.

Channels of advice provision. Channels of advice provision could be a barrier for seeking advice. Those that are also on a low-income highlighted difficulties with telephone advice: e.g., *“It can take hours, if the phone is low on credit that can be an issue”*, whilst individuals with

cognitive impairment noted the stress and confusion of having information explained over the telephone (*“I find the phone difficult because I get confused and it makes me go into anxiety”*).

When digital engagement is necessary, individuals sometimes feel overwhelmed and rely on others if they can (e.g. elderly consumers relying on their children to help). This particularly impacts older consumers and people living with disabilities. It was noted by the charity supporting older people, that providing guides and factsheets digitally relies on a good level of reader comprehension, and there is a risk of people misinterpreting the text or becoming overwhelmed by too much information. Participants in the energy advice provider workshop were aware of misinformation and scams being spread online and raised a concern that consumers who are less confident online might be more at risk of this.

DE consumers, especially those living in rural an/or deprived areas, noted struggle to access in-person advice: e.g., *“Going in person would be better than on the phone but it’s closed now”*; *“There are so few people who are qualified to do it that you’re really open to scams”*.

Suitability of advice. With retrofit advice in particular, rural homeowners in hard-to-treat properties felt their options were limited because of where they were located (*“Living in the country, I have no gas so I’m restricted with that sort of thing”*) and/or the qualities of their house (*“A heat pump would be horrendous in our house because it’s big, draughty, stone and difficult to insulate”*). This deters residents implementing retrofit as they foresee *“enormous disruption.”* This barrier extends to monitoring energy usage; rural consumers in the deliberative workshops discussed their frustrations over their smart meters not working because they live in a rural location.

Table 4 provides a summary of the relevant barriers at different stages of engagement.

Table 4: Barriers at different points of the customer journey when seeking advice

Stage of engagement	Barriers
Initial awareness of need for advice or support	<p>Lack of awareness to seek energy advice in the first place.</p> <p>Not knowing where to start often results in feeling passed around which can be demotivating.</p> <p>Being at crisis point means other issues take priority.</p>
Accessing advice	<p>Lack of local, in-person advice provision; using the internet is not a viable alternative without some support.</p> <p>Cost of phone credit to sit and wait on phone lines.</p> <p>Fear of negative consequences (e.g., children being taken into care) and feeling embarrassed of their circumstances.</p>

Stage of engagement	Barriers
Engaging with advice	<p>In advertising the service, cold calls and visits feel disarming and untrustworthy, meaning people are less likely to engage.</p> <p>Language difficulties mean communicating on the telephone is not an option for some consumers.</p> <p>Lack of time to seek support.</p> <p>Rural homeowners see generic retrofit advice as being ill-suited and not applicable to them.</p>

When considering the barriers in the context of the COM-B framework¹⁵, all of the HTR and DE groups identified experienced barriers to one of, if not all, components: capability, opportunity and motivation. The groups that faced the most barriers were older consumers, unemployed and low-income consumers, and people living with disabilities. Many of these identities intersect, further complicating the impact of these barriers on people's ability to seek and engage with advice provision.

3.3.6. Enablers for seeking advice

Interview and workshop participants noted some factors that would encourage HTR and DE consumers to seek advice. They are summarised below.

Recommendation from a trusted source. One of the most prevalent mechanisms that led to HTR consumers seeking advice was to hear recommendations and referrals from trusted peers such as friends, family, and organisations they are involved with. As mentioned earlier, positive experiences from others were useful in informing decisions to seek advice and where from.

Group settings. Group settings were mentioned as useful for sharing ideas and gaining suggestions from *“people from a similar background with similar issues, you benefit from group thinking”*. For example, one organisation hosted a group session specifically around energy, providing peers with a forum to share tips and experiences: *“They start topics to say 'Energy, how are you feeling, I hope you're all keeping warm.' Then people start raising their hands to explain what they're going through and then others say what they have done to conquer that issue”*.

The importance of advertising these group setting forums was highlighted in the deliberative workshops, as many cognitively impaired individuals were not aware an energy advice event

¹⁵ The COM-B model of behaviour is a framework that identifies three necessary factors for any behaviour to occur: capability, opportunity, and motivation. See more: <https://doi.org/10.32388/WW04E6>.

had occurred at their support group centre in the past. However, all expressed that had they known, they would have been keen to participate, as they would have been around known, trusted individuals in a location where they were confident, so they would feel supported.

Community outreach and referral partnerships. Outreach was seen as an important enabler by the specialist advice providers, especially for increasing reach. Those who live in relative social isolation, or isolated communities often do not have the opportunity to engage with advice services as they are unaware of their existence; and as such, communication and outreach is a key enabler. Additionally, partnership with organisations who already work closely with these groups can provide an entry point. Even those who are not in isolated communities, but who are experiencing a situation, such as debt, for the first time, may not know what help is out there and how to access it.

Raising awareness of energy saving measures. The interviews with consumers found low levels of awareness of energy saving measures. This was explored in more detail in the deliberative workshops. The workshops found that when prompted with visuals (i.e. photographs of the measures), participants did have some awareness, although the levels of understanding of the purpose of the measures and how they could save energy varied widely amongst participants. However, all participants showed some interest in adopting one or more of the measures presented to them.

Trusted source. HTR and DE consumers cited characteristics that they felt were important for services and organisations to have, to encourage them to reach out for advice. In general, these reflect the points made above regarding the information sources that HTR/DE consumers trust.

Digital enablers. Participants in the energy advice providers workshop acknowledged that digital advice has value and that the way it is provided can make it more inclusive. One organisation was providing a course to improve digital skills, which included discussions around energy in terms of paying bills and seeking advice. They also noted that while digital advice may be the preferred option for some users, particularly young people, there is more to do to ensure it meets their needs.

Measures that participants felt were important in making digital energy advice inclusive and usable included providing the choice for users to select their own accessibility options, using social media effectively, considering new formats such as video content (which was seen as a useful tool for overcoming language barriers), being mindful of using QR codes which could be a barrier for some consumers, and raising awareness around new tools and apps that help customers understand and manage their energy usage.

3.3.7. Delivering energy advice to HTR and DE

To understand how the energy advice service could be best delivered to meet the needs of HTR and DE consumers, a number of scenarios were presented and deliberated in the workshops, including telephone helpline, energy café, home visits, and neighbourhood visits. It is worth noting HTR consumers expressed different preferences for how they would like to hear about services and how to access them, which suggests that one single channel is

unlikely to be successful, and instead a range of methods should be considered. For example, letters (or leaflets), when done in the right way, can help to legitimise a service.

Telephone Helpline

In summary, there were mixed views expressed by consumers regarding the telephone helpline. It is unlikely to work for all types of consumers at all points in the customer journey.

Some consumers said they would welcome a telephone advice service, and said they had had positive experiences of using other telephone services that had met their individual needs. Some consumers felt that using the telephone would be convenient as they would not have to leave home and family members/carers could be present to facilitate the conversation, and perceived that it would be simple, although perhaps had not appreciated the level and complexity of information sometimes associated with energy saving measures. The telephone service could work for some parts of the customer journey e.g. where consumers have relatively simple questions, or would like to book a face-to-face appointment, but not for all groups classed as HTR/DE.

Consumers were unsure whether a telephone advice line could provide advice on energy saving measures without viewing the property, or the individual's circumstances first. Some consumers explained that they would find it difficult to 'take-in' information over the phone, which links with the finding that HTR consumers often rely on visuals to help them understand information, and a preference to see someone face-to-face when communicating with them to help overcome language or cognitive barriers. Consumers were also hesitant about a telephone service, for fear of being passed around different departments / advisers, being in long queues, or being dealt with by impatient call-handlers that do not appreciate their individual needs and may not be energy experts. The use of a digital assist model was discussed, and while there was support for this from some consumers, some (non-native English speakers, and the cognitively impaired) said it would not work for them.

Energy café¹⁶

Views on the energy café model were generally positive across all the groups.

Consumers in all groups were enthusiastic about the opportunity to interact with a service face-to-face and therefore initially liked the idea of an energy café. Some consumers (non-native English speakers and cognitively impaired consumers) felt their additional needs would be better met, as visuals could be presented to explain complicated concepts, and body language and lip reading could be used to help overcome communication issues.

¹⁶ Described to participants as "an advisor that you can visit who is based at a local community space (e.g. town hall) or hosted by a community group (e.g. faith groups, hobby groups, sports clubs)."

Consumers across all groups were also supportive of the idea that an energy café could be delivered as part of existing community initiatives. Ideas include the energy café ‘popping-up’ at local events or in existing locations frequently visited by HTR/DE individuals (libraries, churches, markets, community centres, supermarkets). Going through community organisations which are known, used and trusted by HTR/DE individuals would also help increase trust in the service.

However, some individuals in each group were concerned about the accessibility of the model in terms of travel, the fear of long waits if it was a drop-in service, whether they would be given enough time to speak with an adviser given their additional needs (e.g. communication barriers), whether the opening times would be convenient, and whether they would be able to take their partner or carer. Some consumers were also unsure about whether they would be able to make decisions about energy saving measures in an energy café setting, as they may be unable to accurately represent their current energy system verbally or would need a joint-decision making partner present, suggesting they would need to take information away with them to consider.

Home visits

Overall, this was the preferred method of delivery across all groups. Participants liked the convenience it offers in terms of timings, the ability of using visuals to aid explanations, and the ability to have a partner / carer present to help facilitate and for safeguarding. The comfort, convenience and accessibility that comes with being in your own home was also key, especially for those with additional needs.

All groups also felt that in-home advice would more effectively take the property and their own needs into consideration when recommending energy saving measures, with an adviser there to see things first-hand. This may also be beneficial given that some consumers lacked knowledge about their homes, for example whether their home was made of cavity or solid wall.

There are inevitably some aspects of delivering advice in this way that would need to be carefully considered, including safeguarding for both the consumer and advisor.

Some felt that it would be important for an in-home service to be trustworthy, as they were wary of having a stranger in their home. One suggestion included using retired experts as the advice providers, who have the time and knowledge, and are willing to share it in completing home visits one or two days a week in their local neighbourhood. It was felt that this local, independent support would increase trust in the service as well as minimising the resource issue of having energy experts completing potentially lengthy home visits.

Neighbourhood Visits

Overall, there was very little support for this model of delivery. The main reasons were a lack of trust in door-knocking activity in general, the inability to reach those who don't answer to cold callers and the inadequacy of the advice given due to a lack of personalisation. These

concerns are amplified in those with additional needs, who feel more vulnerable when people appear at their door uninvited.

It was suggested that neighbourhood visits could be effective when approaching a consumer who had already considered energy saving measures before, if they 'were caught at the right time in the right place.' This door-knocking could become the first point of communication in gaining their interest in the advice service specifically, before going on to organise next steps. Consumers in the cognitively impaired group reported that Age Concern were a good example of conducting successful door-knocking activity and perceived that this was because the organisation was well-known, trusted and the support being offered being relevant to the consumers' needs at the time. Consumers suggested that door-knocking could be more effective if teamed with delivering leaflets through doors first to help explain who the door knockers are and their purpose and / or providing initial support to one consumer in the community and then encouraging them to recommend the service to others.

4. Conclusions

The aim of this research was to develop a comprehensive understanding of current advice provision across England and to identify the locations, needs and preferences of hard-to-reach (HTR) and digitally excluded (DE) consumers.

In conclusion, the current advice provision is mainly centred on “crisis-management”, with most organisations focusing their efforts on resolving customers’ immediate financial concerns with regards to energy (such as switching tariffs and payment plans), rather than focusing on longer-term energy saving measures and renewables. The advice provision is unevenly distributed across the country, with the South East being most served, while the East of England being least served. An England-wide energy advice service could resolve this unequal distribution and would alleviate a key barrier of consumers not knowing “where to look” for advice.

HTR/DE consumers seek energy advice through several sources, with phone, face-to-face and digital options being preferred by different groups and individuals, depending on their needs. Importantly, homogeneity across HTR and DE individuals cannot be assumed. Each consumer group presents vastly differing and complex barriers, considerations and needs, which cannot all be satisfied in one single approach.

Friends and family, and specialist organisations are key mechanisms by which HTR/DE consumers seek support. The most effective engagement approaches to support adoption of energy efficiency behaviours and measures for HTR/DE groups are informed by the key barriers and enablers that these groups face. These are detailed below through a COM-B lens.

Capability

Capability pertains to a person’s physical and psychological ability to perform a behaviour. In seeking advice and support, the following capability barriers have been found through the research: not having English as a first language, not being confident with digital tools, lack of local advice provision, and cost of phone credit.

Capability barriers can be addressed through education, but the interviews and workshops have also found that advocacy, and restructuring the advice in a way which is understandable to these customers (e.g. through video demonstrations, subtitles, or using visuals) can be enablers. Offering high quality interpretation for Deaf people and those with English as a second language enables those groups to access the information more easily. There is a desire for advice that is tailored to the property and the consumer, as HTR/DE consumers sometimes lack knowledge about their home.

Those who live in relative social isolation, or isolated communities, often do not have the capability to engage with advice services as they are unaware of their existence. Indeed, a key barrier found in the consumer interviews was not knowing where to look for advice. As such, communication and outreach will be key. Additionally, partnership with organisations who work

closely with these groups may be the key way in. Even those who are not in isolated communities, but who are experiencing a situation, such as debt, for the first time, may not know what help is out there and how to access it. Clear, supportive messaging across multiple channels is a key enabler for reaching these people.

Opportunity

Opportunity relates to whether the physical and social environment is structured in such a way that those who need support can get it.

Promoting and offering advice in a multitude of ways ensures that different individuals have the opportunity to seek advice when they need it. For example, face-to-face services can be key for those with communication difficulties or cognitive impairments. Deaf people who speak BSL might also need face-to-face support, or a video call, while those with certain mental health conditions, or who feel embarrassed seeking support, might prefer a more anonymous online option. The telephone remains a good option for those without digital capability. The use of visuals is also important in gaining the attention of, and helping to explain difficult concepts to, HTR/DE consumers. Multiple steps are likely to be required in the customer journey, for example an initial positive contact, followed by a second more detailed engagement. In summary, a variety of options is key for reaching HTR groups.

Those in full-time work, or with caring responsibilities may lack opportunity to seek advice due to the lack of time. As such, offering support during evenings and weekends may benefit these customers. Home visits also offer an important opportunity for individuals who are unable, or struggle to leave the house.

Motivation

Motivation relates to emotions and beliefs. Across all groups, some customers lack motivation to seek advice, even if they are able, for example, those who do not trust “the system”, those who have had negative experiences seeking advice in the past, or those who do not want to be a burden. Some customers have incorrect beliefs around seeking help – thinking it will affect their credit rating, or have their children taken away from them, which naturally decreases motivation to seek help. Conversely, some optimistically believe that the situation will get better by itself and delay seeking advice.

Consumer perceptions of the upfront costs associated with energy saving measures is a challenge that needs to be considered; with this either being addressed through more promotion of financial support, or challenging misinformation about the upfront costs.

Trust is a key enabler to increase motivation. This can be built by hearing positive experiences from peers and seeing themselves represented in the system. Representation is particularly key for disabled customers, who are better able to trust that the advice given is relevant to them if the advisor shares their accessibility needs. For Deaf people in particular, having an interpreter present at the interaction (rather than having to wait for one) creates a much more positive experience.

Getting it “right first time” and offering a holistic service (with as few as possible touchpoints) would enable customers to get the support they need without “dropping out” of the journey. This would also build trust among consumers who would not feel as though they were being “passed around” as much. A positive experience can reinforce the benefits of seeking advice, increase trust in the provider and lead to spreading the word amongst the community, increasing opportunity for others to seek advice when needed.

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