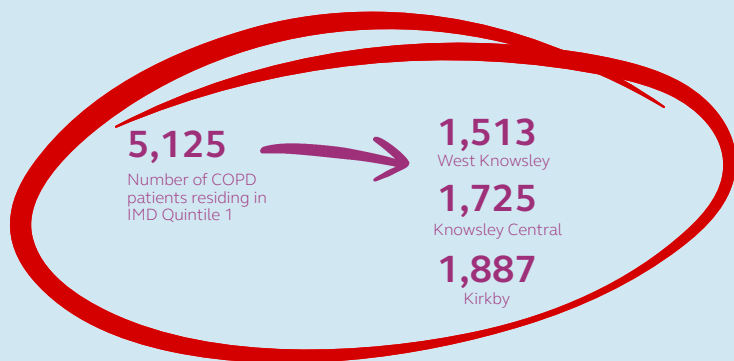


Tackling Fuel Poverty in Primary Care

Background

The prevalence of COPD in the Cheshire & Merseyside ICB stands at 2.5%, surpassing the 1.9% England average. Over 39,000 individuals affected are among the most deprived 20% nationally, facing significant health disparities due to limited access to healthcare and adverse social determinants. NHS England's Core20PLUS5 strategy aims to address these inequalities. Evidence indicates that 80% of health outcomes are impacted by broader determinants. The "Fuel Poverty Programme," initiated in 2022, has utilised CIPHA data to assist COPD patients, providing referrals for home insulation, heating, and financial support. Over 1,330 patients have been aided, with many more still eligible.

Knowsley Place Project



Cold homes exacerbate Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), leading to increased GP appointments, exacerbation, and emergency admissions. In Knowsley, fuel poverty is a critical social determinant of health. The "SMS Warmer Homes Direct" project seeks to bridge the gap between clinical care and social support.

Targeting 5,125 patients across Knowsley who are diagnosed with COPD and reside within the Core20% (IMD Quintile 1). The cohort is distributed across three PCNs.

Collaborators

Following a successful initial phase in Kirkby, this initiative has expanded across all three Primary Care Networks (PCNs) in Knowsley. The project is a multi-agency collaboration between Health Innovation North West Coast, Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council, Energy Projects Plus, and local GP practices.

The Pilot Process: Simple & Scalable

- Step 1** Identification of the cohort: Using the CIPHA Fuel Poverty dashboard COPD patients living in the most deprived 20% (Quintile 1) are identified.
- Step 2** Multi-channel communication: Using the Accurx SMS service, a standardised SMS message is sent to the identified patient list with a referral link to Energy Projects (EPP). For patients without a registered mobile number, printed letters are sent to ensure equitable access to the service.
- Step 3** Preventative support: The GP practice facilitates self-referrals to EPP to help residents keep their homes warm and reduce the incidence of cold-related illness.
- Step 4** Ongoing point-of-care awareness : Printed posters and flyers featuring QR codes for direct self-referral to EPP are well displayed within all participating GP surgeries.

Findings

May 2026

3,060

Number of people contacted via GP.

510 (17%)

Number of people that self-referred. Exceeding the 10% project target.

459 (90%)

Of the 510 people, the number that heard about the project via SMS.

£114,000+

Financial benefits realised by clients from energy bill reduction, cost savings and financial payments.

357 (78%)

Of the 457 people, that completed the self-referral form, 357 were interested in staying warm at home.

Promotional Materials In Use



One Household Story

Background

The clients rent their home from a social housing provider. The property has an energy efficiency rating of C. However, due to mobility-limiting conditions, the clients have a higher-than-average consumption of utilities, which has resulted in significant debts on their electricity, gas, and water accounts.

Problem

Water Debt: £506, with monthly payments of £20 in addition to ongoing usage. Energy Debt: £634 total (£387 gas, £247 electric). Currently on prepay, with a 35% debt repayment rate. For every £10 top-up, £3.50 goes towards the debt, leaving £6.50 for fuel.

Intervention

Renegotiated repayment rate for the prepayment meters at 10%, allowing the clients £9 for energy from every £10 they top up.

Applied to the United Utilities Trust Fund to clear the water debt and, despite not being with British Gas for energy, we sought assistance from the British Gas Energy Trust due to the household vulnerability.

We successfully received £486.03 from the United Utilities Trust Fund and £625.52 from the British Gas Energy Trust for debt clearance.

Patient Feedback

"I became so ill that I was unable to do anything. My husband didn't know anything about paying the bills, and before I knew it, we were in arrears. To be perfectly honest, I just wanted to end everything.....Then came Imogen (EPP), our Knight in Shining Armour. I don't know how she did it, but she cleared our arrears, so she lifted a massive lump of rock off my shoulders. I can't describe how I felt when Imogen told us the news that would change our lives forever."

Support Provided By EPP

✓ **Retrofit and boiler repair/replacement schemes**

✓ **Emergency fuel vouchers**

Residents experiencing fuel crisis, to access emergency support, such as fuel vouchers for prepay meters at risk of self-disconnection.

✓ **Fuel debt relief and repayment**

Residents in fuel debt are aided in establishing affordable repayment plans and applying for any available financial debt relief based on their circumstances.

✓ **Access to cheaper, greener energy tariffs**

Help residents in finding more affordable energy tariffs, making future bills easier to manage. Whenever feasible, we encourage 'green' tariffs that help reduce carbon emissions.