



Case Study

Delivering a Park Homes project – the experience of Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council



Action for Warm Homes



Introduction

Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council (MBC) delivered a mains gas extension project to a Park Homes site to the east of Walsall, funded through the WHF. In conversations with the evaluation team, Walsall MBC's delivery managers explained that their project was motivated by a long-standing appreciation of some of the fuel poverty-related challenges facing residents of Park Homes sites.

Foremost among these was the use of LPG, which was difficult for many older residents (especially those with health conditions) to physically carry and connect to their homes – as well as being more expensive than mains gas. The chosen site was Beacon Heights Park, an over 55s estate. The project was undertaken in 2021 and 2022; the evaluation team worked closely with Walsall MBC to monitor the pre- and post-intervention temperatures and humidity in some homes, and distribute questionnaires to residents.

What impact did it have on residents?

Findings from the questionnaires and indoor environmental monitoring show that the main impact of Walsall MBC's project was to help Park Homes residents achieve an equal level of affordable warmth. Five out of nine questionnaire respondents said they could previously keep their Park Home warm in cold temperatures – a finding which is supported by data from the indoor environmental monitoring work. Specifically, because each Park Home used an LPG-fired central heating system with a boiler, moving to natural gas had little impact on temperature within the home. However, residents who could not easily keep their Park Homes warm before their intervention were helped in being able to do so: post-intervention, eight out of nine questionnaire respondents said they could keep their Park Home warm in cold temperatures. Five out of nine questionnaire respondents similarly said the temperature inside their Park Home was better now than it was before, and five out of nine also reported that the cost of their energy bills had fallen. This shows that for some residents, the Park Homes project has enabled them to be warmer at home while reducing their energy costs.

What lessons can be learned from Walsall's experience?

In conversations with Walsall MBC's delivery managers, several learnings and examples of good practice were shared, concerning how they had set

up, managed and delivered the project. These insights can be summarised as follows:

- For local authorities, **partnership-working across different internal departments is key to understanding the viability of fuel poverty projects in Park Homes**. For Walsall MBC, internal licensing and environmental health teams were the gatekeepers to successful engagement with residents at the beginning of the projects – especially because they had pre-existing connections to the sites and their residents' associations.
- **Projects need to adapt their approach to engagement based on the ownership of the site**. At one of Walsall MBC's projects sites, it was initially difficult to persuade the private site owner of the scheme's benefits for them and their residents. Building support among residents was important for securing the site owner's support, as was communicating to the owner that their Park Homes would be easier to let and have less risk of resident turnover if they had gas central heating installed. Overall, this shows that the project needs to be explained and evidenced to both residents and the owner simultaneously. At the second project site, ownership was in the hands of the residents themselves, which made engagement simpler. Whoever they are, establishing trust and rapport with the site owner(s) is important for successfully delivering Park Homes projects that focus on heating system installation.

- **Projects need to have a plan for meter box installation processes**, and work through any potential risks or challenges to meter installation as early in the project as possible. Walsall MBC, for example, experienced a short delay, because gas safety regulations stipulated that installed meters were not permitted within a certain distance of ventilation. Mapping out the meter installation process at the beginning of a project will therefore save time and ensure a more streamlined experience for residents.
- **Projects need to ensure that there is resource costed into the project**
- **for ancillary costs**, such as installing boiler cupboards in Park Homes where they are required.
- **The necessarily area-based nature of Park Homes projects means that regular communication with residents, both individually and through residents' forums, is particularly important.** This ensures that residents are kept informed of the project's progress, even in a phase of relative inactivity, and enables questions to be asked and answered quickly.
- **Early and enthusiastic support from the relevant GDN is essential for the smooth delivery of the project**, and GDNs should, where feasible, be built into the project's funding application and specification prior to its commencement.
- **Other Park Homes infrastructures may present obstacles to delivery**; especially a lack of connection to mains drainage, which may disrupt meter box placement and installation.