

Pilot evaluation

RESPONSIVE RETROFIT SUMMARY INSIGHTS REPORT



CLARION
HOUSING GROUP

By National Energy Action

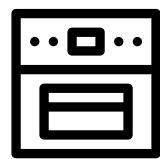
FUSION²¹

'I never knew there was anything out there like that'

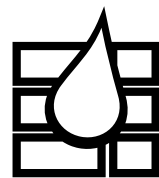
An evaluation of the Responsive Retrofit pilot, a programme delivered by Clarion Futures, the charitable foundation of Clarion Housing Group (Clarion hereafter), was undertaken between 2023-2024 and funded by the Fusion21 Foundation. The Responsive Retrofit pilot (home visit and assessment for low-cost energy interventions) targeted residents who lived in properties with an EPC rating of D and below in the West Midlands and where there was no planned maintenance for heating scheduled. It examined key service outcomes of the programme launched in 2023. The programme sought to integrate money guidance with energy-related advice and support, and to minimise fuel poverty among those living

in energy inefficient properties until large-scale retrofit works are carried out. The Responsive Retrofit pilot provided a range of support that combined money and energy guidance and warm home packs with low-level efficiency measures installed after a holistic home energy assessment. Outcomes explored by the evaluation included improvements to affordable warmth, fuel poverty risk, energy capability and financial wellbeing among those in greatest need. The evaluation also aimed to draw out key lessons for programme design and delivery, including insights for practice. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, including a survey and in-depth interviews with beneficiary households and focus groups with delivery personnel.

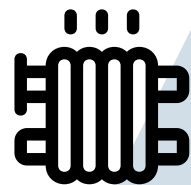
Summary of key findings:



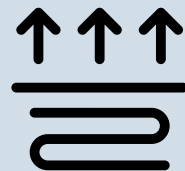
Impacts included immediate relief via food vouchers, vital appliances and furniture; greater ease in affording home energy bills; and improving residents' confidence in managing their household budget.



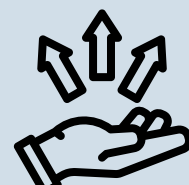
A number of longer-term impacts included improvements in household budgets, damp and mould reduction, and enhanced self-reported health and wellbeing associated with reduced anxiety and financial stress.



The pilot was found to be valuable and impactful, and appeared to lessen the impact of the cost-of-living and energy crises. While many respondents continue to report difficulty heating their home (79%), this was reduced by 17%.



Energy crisis and cost-of-living impacts were mitigated by the pilot. Households that said they could now keep their home warm when it was cold, increased from one in 20 (5%) before support was received, to one in 5 (21%) post-intervention.



Most of the clients surveyed (72%) were very or fairly satisfied overall with the service they received. Aspects of service delivery with the highest levels of satisfaction were 'quality of advice and guidance' and communication.

'I was quite happy about the whole thing really. She (adviser) made a purpose to call me back a month or so later to make sure everything was still okay, and we were getting the help that we needed still.'

(Client interviewee)

'It is me that lives here by myself, so electricity-wise, it was a bit of an issue to cook for myself, to have the whole oven on just to cook for myself. It was often the case of instead of cooking I would just save the electricity, and I would just have a sandwich or a salad or something that is cold as opposed to actually cooking something.'

(Client interviewee)

Reaching vulnerable households

71%

...of clients surveyed were from households where there was a pre-existing health condition and/or disability.

96%

...had access to the internet at home through broadband (Wi-Fi or hard wired, however, only

37%

...said that they felt comfortable or 'expert' in using the internet.

This suggests that while most were 'digitally included' to some extent, their confidence and use of the internet for a wide range of purposes may be more limited. By directly contacting residents, support was made more accessible and engaged households who wouldn't have otherwise done so.

Reaching people in fuel poverty

Findings strongly suggest that the Responsive Retrofit pilot is reaching households in greatest need and who are at risk of, or are already in, fuel poverty. Almost all (95%) self-reported an inability to keep the home warm in winter or when it is cold outside, or only with difficulty, prior to receiving support from the service. The cost of energy was the primary reason for being unable to keep the home warm when cold both before and following support.

Many respondents engaged in rationing behaviours. These are actions whereby people in or at risk of fuel poverty or on low incomes act to cut back or reduce household bills.

64%

...of respondents before receiving support said that they

all, or most of the time, had their heating on lower or less often than they would have liked, in order to save money.

55%

...of respondents said that all, or most of the time, they cut back on buying things they really needed to save money.

'She (adviser) also referred me to a stop smoking service and I have now given up smoking for 9 weeks, 10 weeks, because of her. At that point, in that month, I don't know what I would have done without her'

(Client interviewee)



It's not just fuel poverty – tackling the drivers of poverty

Poverty is more than just a lack of income; it is made up of multiple aspects. The Responsive Retrofit pilot acted as a gateway to a plethora of support tailored to the individual, either delivered directly by Clarion or in conjunction with other agencies.

'I mean if you have got that sort of wiggle room - you are not having to calculate the oven costs per week, I suppose it opens up more options, thinking, 'Oh, I can put the heating on more times or more often.' So, yes, I think it gives you the options or more of a choice.'
(Client interviewee)

'We have had that same problem for years [mould]. They have arranged to get someone to come out to treat the mould. I mean I will be honest, the mould at the front of the property just by the front door, he [the home assessor] is the first person to have noticed it. I didn't even notice it until he came in and was checking the insulation. I will be honest, I wouldn't have even thought there would have been any support there for people.'
(Client interviewee)

'I don't think I would have done (to seek advice from somewhere else), it was just a lot at that point to start the process. Now I have, and obviously it's not as scary as what I thought it was, but at the time, I don't think I'd have gone anywhere, I just was burying my head in the sand further and further, to be honest.'
(Client interviewee)

More than just a landlord

Awareness appeared relatively low of the types and range of services provided by social landlords, such as those provided by Clarion Futures and the Responsive Retrofit pilot. It was through the pilot and integration of services that

awareness was enhanced.

Results suggest that the service has enabled a change in how housing providers, and Clarion as a social landlord, are perceived. That is, as 'more than just a landlord' but also a source of help and support.

'They are not just taking rent, not being there to support. So, yes, it has made a difference. I know you can always drop an email or ask for some advice. I mean if there are any issues that pop up in the house, it is nice to know that we can always reach out and maybe look for some help or some advice. I think that is the main thing, is just knowing that there is a bit of advice out there if you do need it'

(Client interviewee)



Energy affordability

Prior to receiving support, a large majority of respondents reported finding the affordability of their home energy bills difficult or very difficult (80%). Following support, there was a large (51-percentage point) decrease in respondents reporting difficulty in affording their home energy bills. Results suggest a positive impact on reducing the severity of difficulty in affording home energy bills. Post-intervention, the proportion that said they found it easy or very easy to afford their home energy bills more than tripled from 7% to 26%.

‘Yeah, I don’t tend to worry. I’m not worrying as much as I did when I first moved in. If it’s hot, I’ll put a fan on. If it’s cold, I’ll put the heating on. Because my mental health’s not great and due to my depression, I tend to spend a lot of time at home. It’s nice to know I’m not going to get huge bills from sitting at home and I can just feel at home, feel comfortable and it does reduce my anxiety knowing that it’s all ticking over.’ (Client interviewee)



Impact on wellbeing

Most Responsive Retrofit pilot clients surveyed reported fair or poor mental and/or physical health prior to receiving support.

• Post-intervention, those reporting fair or poor mental and physical health decreased by 14 percentage points from 63% to 49%, and 20 percentage points from 61% to 41%, respectively.

• Conversely, those reporting excellent, very good or good mental and physical health increased. *‘We’ve seen a rise in what money we have leftover afterwards. We’ve bettered our income and we’re watching more of how it goes out. So, we don’t go into the emergency when it comes to electric much anymore. In terms of heating, we don’t have it on anyway. It’s too hot to have it on, but we have that opportunity*

that if we wanted to turn it on, we could.’ (Client interviewee) When respondents were asked if changes to their mental or physical health were linked to the support, it is notable that between one in five and one in four attributed changes in their health to the advice and support they received.

‘Everything really because they helped me out with everything. I spoke to a financial person, who was brilliant. And I got so much help, so much help. They’ve been brilliant, absolutely brilliant, and it has helped my mental health as well.’ (Client interviewee)

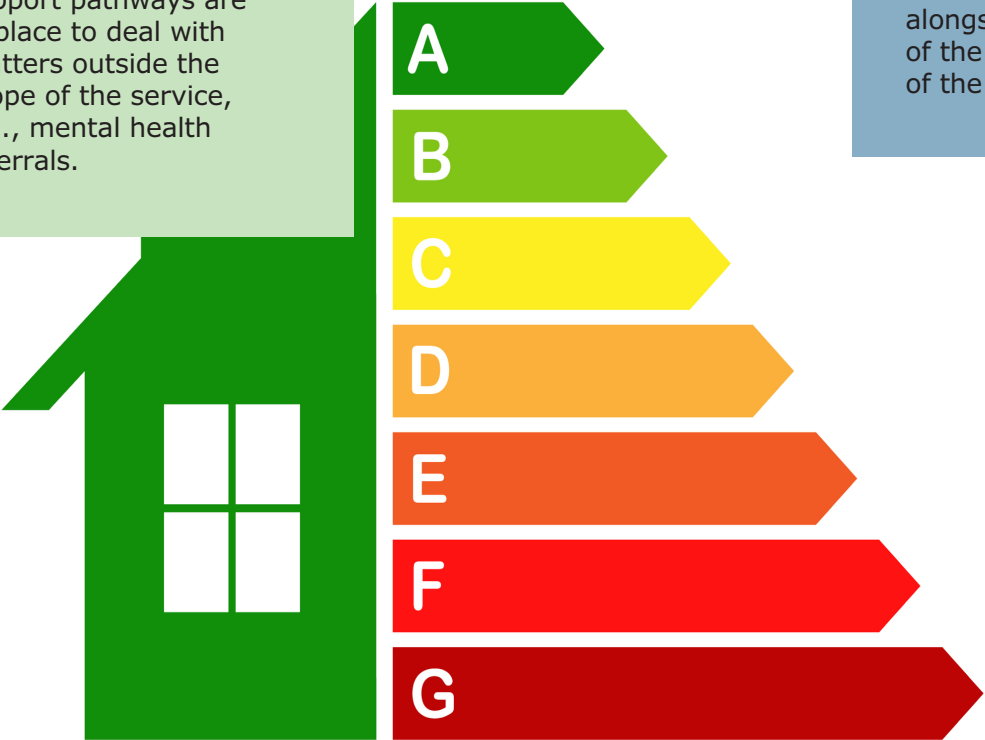
Insights for practice

‘We know people, if you’re in an inefficient property, chances are you’re going to struggle with your energy bills. And when you layer on the cost of living, it makes it very difficult.’ (Clarion staff member)

1 In acknowledgement that many clients are facing multiple, complex and intersecting issues, external partnership working, and referral pathways should be continuously developed and embedded. This could help to ensure that any client needs identified that may fall outside of the scope of the service can be acted upon or cross-referred, and that appropriate crisis or emergency support pathways are in place to deal with matters outside the scope of the service, e.g., mental health referrals.

2 Consideration should be given to the planning and integration with other services. Insights from delivery personnel suggested a feeling of being ‘rushed’ at times, and this may have impacted how cohesively activities fit together as a whole and with other aspects of Clarion’s services. Although it is acknowledged that this is a pilot, delivery teams worked to rectify and amend the approach according to lessons learned along the way. This approach should be continued and alongside future programmes planning, the integration of internal services should be considered.

3 Future consideration should be given to how targeting the most vulnerable households can be integrated with targeting based on property-level characteristics (e.g. the EPC rating). This criterion has served as a good basis for identifying householders in need of support and reaching new demographics while managing demand. However, as the programme develops it may look to reflect a more holistic consideration of household vulnerability and support needs (as implemented by the Clarion Futures service) alongside considerations of the energy efficiency of the property.



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It is particularly positive that the pilot appears to be reaching client groups who might otherwise have been unaware of, or not engaged with, support. This widens the scope of households that can be supported. Testimony from clients underlined this in expressions of surprise that services like the Responsive Retrofit pilot were available to them from their social landlord. Consequently, residents reported being more open to, and now knowing how to, reengage with the service if they needed to in future. The impact of knowing where to turn to for help was also reported.

The service experienced delays in providing the in-home assessment and energy efficiency measures to residents. This meant that initial plans to begin installation of measures prior to the cold weather period (winter 2023-24) were not able to go ahead as quickly as hoped. Future planning may need to account for accommodating lessons from earlier practice or pilots, and for longer timelines for the installation of measures, particularly where there are seasonal concerns.

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A more consistent approach in communication and support provided to clients is identified as an area for improvement. Some clients reported excellent communication throughout. However, others reported challenges in this regard, including not receiving products promptly or not receiving energy or money guidance support; difficulty making contact to follow up with the service; and not being made aware or kept up to date about decisions. Consideration should be given to how a consistent approach throughout the customer journey could be introduced that encompasses all aspects of the service and partners involved. Learnings from this pilot should be taken into an SLA with the delivery contractor in future iterations of the projects.

Staff acknowledged the value of embedding monitoring and evaluation into the programme to track short-term impacts and levels of engagement, and had continued to use existing tools to track impacts among clients. For example, self-reported measures of control, trust and confidence among clients. Impacts upon clients' wellbeing and other outcomes associated with the programme are likely to take longer to be fully realised. However, tools and processes for evaluating changes and impacts in the longer term should also be considered and embedded. This would allow for shared learning between internal and external partners. This could include more agile delivery tools (software), for example, to refer clients internally and to track their progress and aftercare, and respond where issues are identified. This would also support Clarion to identify the cost-benefits of the programme and to make decisions around future funding of similar services.

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A note on the evaluation

Low client survey response rates have been a limiting factor and, consequently, the evaluation was unable to disaggregate results by the two types of intervention (money and financial guidance and in-home energy support).



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About Fusion21 and the Fusion21 Foundation

Fusion21 is a national social enterprise specialising in efficient and impactful public sector procurement and visible social value.

The Fusion21 Foundation was set up in 2015 as a registered charity, to help build brighter futures for the communities that Fusion21 operates in. Since its inception in 2015, the Foundation has given over £3 million in grants and has committed £2 million in social investment. The Foundation has three areas of focus: Employment and Skills; Health and Wellbeing; Financial Inclusion and Resilience.
www.fusion21.co.uk/foundation and www.fusion21.co.uk.

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