



# Case Study

Connect for  
Help



Action for Warm Homes



# Introduction

Connect for Help was a free service that provided support for households nationwide. As a Category 3 project, Connect for Help specialised in offering services such as benefits entitlement checks, applying on behalf of households for insulation and heating measures, and onward referrals to local public services, if applicable. The service was open to renters, homeowners and social tenants alike. All were eligible for an introductory review of their circumstances; however, low-income householders were prioritised for in-depth case work.

Connect for Help was awarded funding to provide advice under Category 3 of the Warm Homes Fund. AgilityEco and IncomeMax partnered in the bid to deliver this service through the Warm Homes Fund. The findings in this case study are from a combination of questionnaires distributed to Connect for Help beneficiaries, and an interview with members of the Connect for Help delivery team. The evaluation team also interviewed several Connect for Help beneficiaries to learn more about their experiences.

## What were the aims and objectives?

Connect For Help was designed to support vulnerable and low-income households via a free telephone service, which provided advice on bill reduction and management, benefit entitlement checks, and support with applications for insulation and heating measurements. The project also aimed to expand the referral pathways available to individuals and households in need of energy advice. Connect For Help is available for social tenants, homeowners, and private renters. The following case study provides an overview of the project's partners, funding, successes, and challenges.

## What were the impacts on households?

Questionnaire data collected by the evaluation in 2021 and 2022 from Connect for Help beneficiaries shows that:

- 48% of questionnaire respondents who received support from Connect for Help said the temperature in their home is more comfortable now than it was before.
- 41% of questionnaire respondents said they now have more control over their heating system after receiving support from Connect for Help.

- Before their intervention, 52% of questionnaire respondents said they couldn't keep warm at home, and it affected their physical health. Post-intervention, 30% of respondents said their physical health is now better.
- After receiving support, 54% of Connect for Help questionnaire respondents agreed that they are now more interested in how they can be more sustainable in other ways, and 74% agreed that they are more interested in how energy is used in the home and how they can save energy.

## Who did it help?

The evaluation team carried out interviews with beneficiaries who were supported by Connect for Help, such as Julia. Julia had been struggling with energy debt for some time, which was negatively affecting her mental health. She described an overwhelming feeling of *"depression and not paying things and getting overwhelmed."* Before receiving support, Julia described how *"it was stressful, obviously, panicking about the bills."* Connect For Help referred Julia to other services who supported her to restructure her debt, and simultaneously helped her directly with a Personal Independence Payment (PIP) application. Julia described the feeling afterwards, both of receiving support and of having someone willing to listen to her: *"It makes me a lot calmer. It wasn't so much of a panic."*

At the same time, Julia received advice on how to use and manage her energy, including her heating, from Connect for Help's advisors. As a result of being able to understand her bills more positively, Julia's confidence in her home increased: *"I was constantly watching the heating. But now I'm not as worried about it and I'm more confident, and I know it is going to switch off at a certain time, but then I'm able to keep an eye on it but not watch it like I was watching it."*

Julia says her experience with Connect For Help's advisors not only made her more confident in querying and questioning bills and suppliers, but supported her in a personalised and dignified manner. Julia remembered the conversations she had over the phone: *"It wasn't just like a normal phone call from a company [...] it really felt like she was trying to help me and help me stay calm rather than stress me out."* Or as she put it later in the interview, *"she just made me feel a lot more comfortable and confident."*

Julia's experience is one of several that the evaluation learned about in interviews with Connect for Help beneficiaries. Many more of these are discussed anonymously in the main evaluation report, and a further repository of Connect for Help case studies, maintained by AWS, shows the range of impacts the service had on people across the country.

## What were the main enablers of success?

A key enabler of Connect for Help's success was its ability to offer services via telephone to a large proportion of Great Britain, rather than deliver a localised service available only to people within a particular local authority boundary or constituency. One delivery staff member summarised that *"the Connect for Help programme allowed us to extend our advice services into more areas, using the telephone as the means of communicating with customers, rather than going into people's homes."* In other words, *"what Connect for Help allowed us to do is really do a proper nationwide service because, where we hadn't got anybody on the ground, we would offer them the telephone advice service."* Previous research by NEA has found that advice services that are localised, offered only to residents within a particular catchment area, can have an enormous impact, but sometimes also lead to 'postcode lotteries' of provision, *"with many areas of the country having limited or no advice provision*

*available for fuel-poor households and little capacity or willingness to signpost to national services."*<sup>1</sup> Connect for Help partially closed this gap.

The connections between agencies were a second contributing factor to the success of the project – especially those between AgilityEco and IncomeMax. For example, one delivery staff member said: *"We're used to collaborating and working together with IncomeMax and we both know how each other works. We also had established existing systems which allowed us to interface with each other, and things like that. So, that made it really straightforward to get the project off the ground."* This established collaboration enabled *"sharing systems, and the way we established mechanisms for passing results backwards and forwards to each other, and writing case studies together and that sort of thing [...] because we also work on other projects, if we had overflow or we were, you know, struggling in area of whatever, we had ways of moving people about between the other projects on which we were collaborating, to enable us to stay within the budget and things like that."*

Being able to use previous frameworks, marketing, and knowledge of what works was another enabling factor. Prior to the establishment of Connect for Help, AgilityEco formed (and is still delivering) the Local Energy Advice Partnership (LEAP) service. Forms of outreach and ways of working together with organisations could therefore be carried across to Connect for Help, especially in terms of marketing. For example, a delivery staff member narrated how *"it links in again with what we do [with] LEAP, it's easy to duplicate it. So, kind of change the words. Instead of LEAP, it's Connect for Help. Instead of home visits, it's a telephone advice call. So, it makes it a little bit easier. So, obviously, a lot of it was social media."* As this quote indicates, social media quickly became a key way of advertising that support was available, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Finally, in addition to marketing, word of mouth was important for driving referrals to the project. For instance, as in Julia's case, *"once you've had a good experience with a provider, you will tell your friends or your family, or the people in your neighbourhood, and they will then refer themselves on to us."* Being able to offer training and awareness sessions to frontline workers also supported referrals, and maximised the linkages the project could make with other organisations.

1. NEA (2021) Fuel Poverty Monitor 2021.

## What are the lessons we can learn?

One of the main lessons from the project was the potential need to incorporate more ways of measuring and monitoring the impact of fuel poverty and energy efficiency programmes, especially those focused on advice provision. Connect for Help delivery staff discussed some of the challenges they had experienced with reporting, and how delivering the project highlighted the benefits of measuring outcomes and outputs in project data. As one staff member put it, “one of the things that we’re moving towards, as we’ve done this project, is this need for a multi-indicator approach to the measurement of schemes like this.” This was mirrored in some of the findings of the evaluation as a whole, and other projects noted that similar efforts might be needed to holistically understand what fuel poverty and energy efficiency schemes can achieve in the future – both for funders and the wider world.

Secondly, the experiences of Connect for Help are related to the challenges associated with energy advice funding that is not long-term (e.g. 5+ years). We interviewed Connect for Help’s delivery staff when the project was drawing to a close, with efforts and resources being refocused into the LEAP service. At the time of writing, Julia might not be able to receive her previous level of support. There is no easy solution to how energy advice services can be funded and sustained over longer periods, but this issue has been highlighted by Connect for Help’s example, and it will be considered in more detail in the evaluation blueprint.