

Energy and Disability:

Improving home retrofit
for Disabled people and
caregivers

Executive summary

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Executive summary

Disabled people and caregivers¹ experience a range of barriers that risk excluding them from the energy transition. They are twice as likely to be in poverty compared to non-disabled counterparts² due to experiencing barriers to employment or, for caregivers, having fewer hours in which to earn income. Many disabled people also have more demands for energy use, be it from being at home more or to meet energy-related health needs such as additional heating, running assistive-powered technologies (e.g. electric wheelchair) or for storing medicine. The combination of low income and high energy cost puts Disabled people at risk of fuel poverty. Government statistics show that 59.5% of fuel poor households receive at least one income-related benefit. This rises to 68.7% if disability benefits are included.³

This report presents research findings on the needs of Disabled people and caregivers in relation to energy advice and home energy efficiency improvement services. Research was conducted in April 2024-June 2025. It was funded by the National Lottery's Climate Action Fund and delivered by the Centre for Sustainable Energy (CSE) as part of the Community Climate Action Project, coordinated by Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership (BCNP).

Research aims

- To initially identify the likely barriers, solutions and co-benefits of the energy transition for Disabled people in Bristol.
- To understand the experiences and needs of Disabled people and caregivers in obtaining energy advice and retrofit.
- To learn from energy advisors and retrofit professionals about current service delivery and the extent to which it takes into account the needs of Disabled people.
- To make recommendations and produce practical resources that support Disabled people, caregivers, energy advisors and retrofit professionals to implement effective, appropriate, high-quality advice and retrofit.

¹ A caregiver is an unpaid carer

² <https://www.equallives.org.uk/post/fuel-poverty-is-a-disability-justice-issue>

³ Annual fuel poverty statistics in England 2025 (2024 data) (2025) Department of Energy Security and Net Zero.

Research approach and methodology

The research was conducted in two stages utilising a co-design methodology that involved Disabled people and caregivers and Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs) in prioritising the direction of the research and commenting on research findings as they emerged.

The scoping and literature review stage of the research took place April-July 2024, whilst the primary research (interviews with Disabled people, caregivers, energy advisors and retrofit professionals, and workshops with Disabled people, DPOs and retrofit professionals took place October 2024-June 2025).

We engaged with Disabled people and caregivers at all stages of the retrofit customer journey – from initial engagement to post-installation support - to understand the challenges and enabling factors across the customer journey. We spoke with retrofit professionals in a variety of roles including junior and senior staff.

Conclusions

We found that financial barriers were at the forefront in preventing Disabled people and caregivers from taking up retrofit. Grants or personal savings enabled Disabled people to progress with retrofit. However, the bureaucracy of the grant application process was off putting. (See section Disabled people and caregivers' experiences of energy advice and retrofit services', particularly 'Support with financial costs').

Disabled people's awareness of energy efficiency measures and eligibility of grant schemes could be limited by lack of independent, trustworthy advice. Inaccessible communications were a key barrier. During retrofit, dissatisfaction with communications applied most to grant organisations, retrofit planners and installers. Whilst these challenges might be experienced by any customer, these problems can have a magnified impact for Disabled people, who often have fewer resources (energy, attention, time) to deal with issues.

When planning and delivering retrofit, Disabled peoples' needs and individual circumstances generally were not taken into account, in spite of the TrustMark consumer vulnerability guidance and an occupancy question in the PAS 2035 assessment where household special requirements can be recorded. Decisions on what measures and technologies to install were affected by commercial concerns rather than suitability and accessibility. Installations could be made which weren't appropriate for the Disabled person, with heat pumps repeatedly being mentioned in this context. Disabled peoples' need for greater flexibility in retrofit delivery could lead to them missing out, as contractors focused on delivering easier work.

At the installation stage, disruption and unexpected disconnection of essential services (like no electricity or water overnight) could cause Disabled people and caregivers significant issues. Inadequate discussion around temporarily vacating the home or need for respite could leave Disabled people in difficult situations. Contractors with little disability awareness could inadvertently add to Disabled peoples' distress.

At handover and post-installation, Disabled people could be distrustful of support offered, which could lead to them not receiving essential information about how to effectively use new technologies. User manuals and product accessibility (apps and screens, connectivity of installations) could also raise issues for Disabled people at the post-installation stage.

The need for impartial advice on smart tariffs, especially the Smart Export Guarantee (SEG) was raised by Disabled people and retrofit professionals. This was found to be particularly relevant in social housing, where it is often unclear whether the tenant can apply for this type of tariff.

Overall, Disabled people experienced the lengthy retrofit process, having to chase contractors and lack of ongoing communications was frustrating and wearisome.

Key recommendations

Recommendations are given based on the research results, organised by the following target stakeholders:

- 1) energy advice organisations & retrofit professionals
- 2) national, regional and local government and industry bodies
- 3) Registered Housing Providers

Suggestions for improvements made directly by Disabled people and caregivers in the survey and interviews are indicated by '*'.

1. Recommendations for energy advice organisations and retrofit professionals

Overall

- Adopt a customer-centred approach. Be flexible to meet the needs of the Disabled person or caregiver. Give information as is needed and can be absorbed by the individual, not to meet quotas. Focus on being with the 'retrofit customer' consistently from start to finish.*
- Ask about Disabled people and caregivers' needs early in the retrofit process in an 'accessibility plan,' including communication, accessibility and individual circumstances. Share the person's engagement needs with all retrofit professionals involved.
- Train advice and retrofit professionals in Disabled people's communication and access needs, with access to disability-specific awareness resources when needed. This training should be designed and run by a Disabled People's Organisation.*
- Have a specialist or ideally someone with lived experience as a single point of contact for Disabled people and caregivers. This person should have regular check-ins with the Disabled people and caregivers, and ensure actions are recorded and traceable.*
- Provide support with forms and the grant application process, including going through and explaining questions and completing forms, if needed.*

- Work with health services, local advice agencies (such as those advising on welfare benefits), community centres, and Disabled People's Organisations and caregivers organisations to raise awareness of retrofit schemes.

Initial engagement

- Talk to people before they sign up to retrofit, especially for low carbon technologies. Promote that independent advice is available to build trust. Outline clearly the benefits of retrofit (e.g. fuel costs, comfort, convenience, carbon emissions reduction).
- For grant-funded retrofit, ask residents to think about having home improvements made 'as if it were your money' to encourage them to ask installers questions and demand good service. Ensure households understand the retrofit process and any implications about technologies they are considering installing. For example, heat pumps may involve a whole new method of heating for someone who normally only heats a few rooms twice a day.
- Create and support accessible communication during the retrofit process with accessible content, formats and delivery. For example, involve a Communications team to create accessible letters and resources, in Easy Read and Plain English; provide British Sign Language interpretation or Video Relay Service if required during surveys and appointments; and avoid the use of confusing terminology and technical jargon. Ideally resources should be codesigned with Disabled People's Organisations. *
- Provide expectation of times between communications so people know how long they will be waiting.
- Organise visits that are accessible for Disabled people and caregivers to local homes or community buildings that have low carbon technologies installed so they can learn from neighbours about their retrofit experiences and see technologies in situ.
- Outline and explain the expected disruption which will result from the retrofit process. Examples include whether or not electricity or water will need to be turned off and for how long, noise disturbance, and how many retrofit professionals will need to enter the home.
- Identify enabling works to support retrofit (repairs, loft clearance, moving furniture) and provide financial support for this.

Household eligibility and building suitability

- Make it clear what retrofit is available and to whom. For example, eligible private tenants can initiate retrofit with their landlord's consent.
- Have transparent eligibility and decision-making processes on retrofit measures available. These appear to be subjected to personal views or commercial decisions (e.g. age exclusion

for solar panel installation, EPC band improvement requirements). An unbiased, honest, documented response on retrofit decisions would be useful and build trust.*

Planning and procurement

- Determine how the Disabled person or caregiver's communication and access needs might impact the retrofit process, thinking about the need for flexibility in delivery, disruption and possible need for respite.
- Personalise the retrofit specification and plan to meet Disabled people's and caregivers' needs.*
- For heat pumps in particular, give a personalised annual running cost which takes into account the Disabled person's heating needs and regimes to assess whether heating will be affordable and comfortable.

Installation

- Have a specialist or ideally someone with lived experience as the accessibility lead. This will ensure the installation caters for the needs of the Disabled person or caregiver. They should check in on the accessibility of journeys and can be a single point of contact for any queries or concerns from Disabled people.
- Provide a phone number for a contact other than the installer, should the Disabled person need to speak to someone else at this retrofit stage.*
- If the project doesn't have an accessibility lead, it is important that the installer takes the time to speak to the householder, or their carer or caregiver, about the retrofit process and the householder's access needs. It is important that the installer does not make assumptions about the householder's needs. *
- Commit to completing installations, ideally with one installer, to provide continuity in delivery and avoid interruptions and unfinished projects.*

Post installation support

- Provide instruction on how to operate low carbon technologies in an accessible format appropriate for the householder. Instructions should be co-created with a Disabled People's Organisation. Make sure that both the Disabled person and caregiver are shown how to use the technology, and that the technician is aware of the communication needs of the Disabled person. Provide guidance that households can return to, such as filmed instructions or written instructions with imagery. *
- Offer appropriate SEG and smart tariff advice. Build trust by emphasising that advice is impartial, that you are not trying to sell a tariff.

- Include feedback from Disabled people and caregivers on the extent to which their access needs were met in monitoring and evaluation. Include this feedback in quality assessment of installers.

2. Recommendations for Government, industry bodies & commissioning organisations

- Have a ten-year plan to provide trained professionals, materials and resources to achieve meeting carbon budget targets. This would be widely beneficial, creating jobs, reducing carbon emissions and putting households more in control of their energy bills.*
- Implement a standard, training or certification for retrofit professionals on how to communicate and behave during home visits with Disabled people with a range of health conditions. This should be created with a Disabled People's Organisation. PAS2035 recommendations are not enough.*
- Create installer contract templates which outline customer service standards, consumer safeguards and redress in relation to Disabled people.
- Add extra sums to retrofit grants that can only be accessed by households with Disabled people. This can pay for additional support, so that Disabled people can have what they need and installers are incentivised to take those jobs.
- Enable retrofit with Disabled people by building more flexibility and support into the process, including an enhanced Retrofit Assessment to fully understand customer needs, digital support if needed and dedicated aftercare support.
- Monitor retrofit contractors to promote high quality standards in processes and installations. Require that retrofit professionals who fall short of standards receive sufficient training and monitor their ongoing work..*
- Provide data from government schemes on uptake of retrofit by Disabled people.

3. Recommendation for Registered housing providers

- When the installation of heat pumps is being planned for social housing, especially where this is being done through mass retrofit programmes, it is critical that consideration is given to the needs of each Disabled household, and how easy or not it will be for them to adapt to new technologies and heat approaches. This is especially important for households with higher-than-average warmth needs. Blanket installations without undue consideration run the risk of households living with inappropriate technologies.
- Ensure accessible design features, like wet rooms, that are already in properties are not removed as part of energy transition renovations.*