

Improving **life** together



Metropolitan
Housing Partnership



HOMES OF OUR TIMES

2011 Report (Year 1)

bshf

The Homes of our Times study supports the investment in our customers and their homes

If you are interested in our broader approach to sustainability, then please view the MHP sustainability strategy and to get a copy of our latest annual report visit our website www.mhp-online.co.uk/sustainability

Front page image by Four Hundred Communications Ltd.



Foreword

Sustainability is not just about 'being green'. It is about working together to bring about positive social change. It's about delivering long term value in all that we do. It's about providing the best homes and services whilst minimizing our impact on the planet that we share.

Metropolitan Housing Partnership is a unique network of locally focused member organisations working together to tackle poverty and inequality by providing a diverse range of housing, community, regeneration, care and support services to over 80,000 customers.

The Partnership shares a common goal to give our customers a better deal in society. We dare to be different; we celebrate diversity and refuse to shy away from the most challenging work within the housing sector.

At the heart of all that we do are our customers. The Homes of our Times study, generously supported by the Building Social Housing Foundation, improves our understanding of the environmental impacts of how our customers use their homes.

Evaluation studies like this will help us meet the challenging carbon targets for new and existing homes and ensure we understand and reflect the needs of our customers in the development of better homes & services.

This is not an academic study: it is intended to provide a rich evidence to inform what we do. We know that customers look to us for support and we recognise that if they are cold and on a low income life is made so much more difficult. This study demonstrates our intention to take action and work with a variety of partners, including our customers, to fight fuel poverty and future rises in energy prices.



Bill Payne
Chief Executive



INTRODUCTION

As Metropolitan Housing Partnership (MHP) strives to deliver against challenging Government expectations for zero carbon in new and existing homes, we are clear that these targets are not just about meeting various physical standards, but that we must also ensure that it is working for our residents too.

MHP has a good track record of building and delivering award winning sustainable new homes and refurbishments, but do we know if our customers are achieving the intended savings, emitting less carbon and using less energy as a result?

In our sustainability strategy, MHP committed to raising environmental awareness amongst staff, customers and partners. For MHP this includes raising customer awareness about how to make the best use of their homes, maximize the investment in energy efficiency investment and make appropriate use of any new technologies. In the face of rising energy prices, this is ever more relevant if we are to support customers to mitigate the risk of fuel poverty.

The Homes of our Times study has undertaken in response to the need to understand better how our customers use their homes, close the gap between the 'theoretical' designed performance and the actual performance of greener homes, and improve the homes and services we deliver in order to make it easier for customers to be more sustainable and save money.

This study focuses on a small but diverse sample of homes. It is not a statistically representative study. It does, however, start to turn what until now has generally been anecdotal evidence into evidenced-based analysis of the social, environmental and financial aspects of our customers' lives, and how they are supported by the services we deliver.

This study provides evidence that our use of visual imagery in our written information is welcomed, however there is scope to make further improvements. Likewise we need to improve our use of other media if we are to improve customers recognition and understanding of the new technologies that we are installing. Finally we recognise that finding a mechanism to give residents greater visibility of their energy consumption would help them better achieve and manage the energy savings we believe are possible in their homes.

In a time of austerity, with a tough financial environment ahead, we cannot afford for our customers not to realize the benefits of our investment in their homes. Whether in a new greener home, or existing stock, we are clear there is an opportunity to support customers to make best use of that property.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and analysis presented in this report, the following initial recommendations are offered:

Improving Communication

- 1 Make further amendments based on customer feedback to the MHP fuel poverty 'Energy & Money Matters' leaflet and develop further information leaflets on heat and energy, making greater use of visual imagery.
- 2 Evaluate a broader sample of customers that are receiving the piloted post occupancy visit to determine its effectiveness.
- 3 Refine the survey questions in year two of this study to improve the analysis of customers' use of heating controls.

Understanding Low & Zero Carbon Technologies

- 4 Establish a more robust process to ensure it is clear to customers moving into a property if there is low and zero carbon technology (LZCT) in their home and how they can maximize its use for their needs.
- 5 Raise staff awareness and check their understanding of the different LZCT, particularly where those staff have a role in explaining the technology and its use to customers.
- 6 Draft a corporate communication for staff and customers on our approach to the emerging Feed in Tariff and explain how MHP will be using income generated.

Raising Energy Consumption Awareness

- 7 Review and update the corporate fuel poverty training module for staff to continue to build their knowledge and skills in supporting customers.
- 8 In addition to the supplier switching service, consider alternative ways to support residents secure the best energy deal for their needs.
- 9 Review and establish a more robust process to improve customers' recognition from the Energy Performance Certificate of the energy performance of their home when they are signed up to a new tenancy.
- 10 Investigate if there is a partnership opportunity in which we can promote a service for customers to compare their energy consumption against similar household types.

METHODOLOGY

This is a three year longitudinal study of a sample of homes. We intend to follow the same homes, tracking the changing customers and their varied experiences during that time.

The core methodology of this study involves conducting face to face interviews with respondents in their homes, using a structured questionnaire. This year a total of 26 households were interviewed, covering 13 distinct developments types. They represent a range of supported accommodation, existing homes, retrofitted and new build properties that MHP owns and manages and a range of technologies in the home.

Further, the sample was selected to provide a representative spread of the geographical areas in which MHP operates; East Midlands, Eastern England and London.

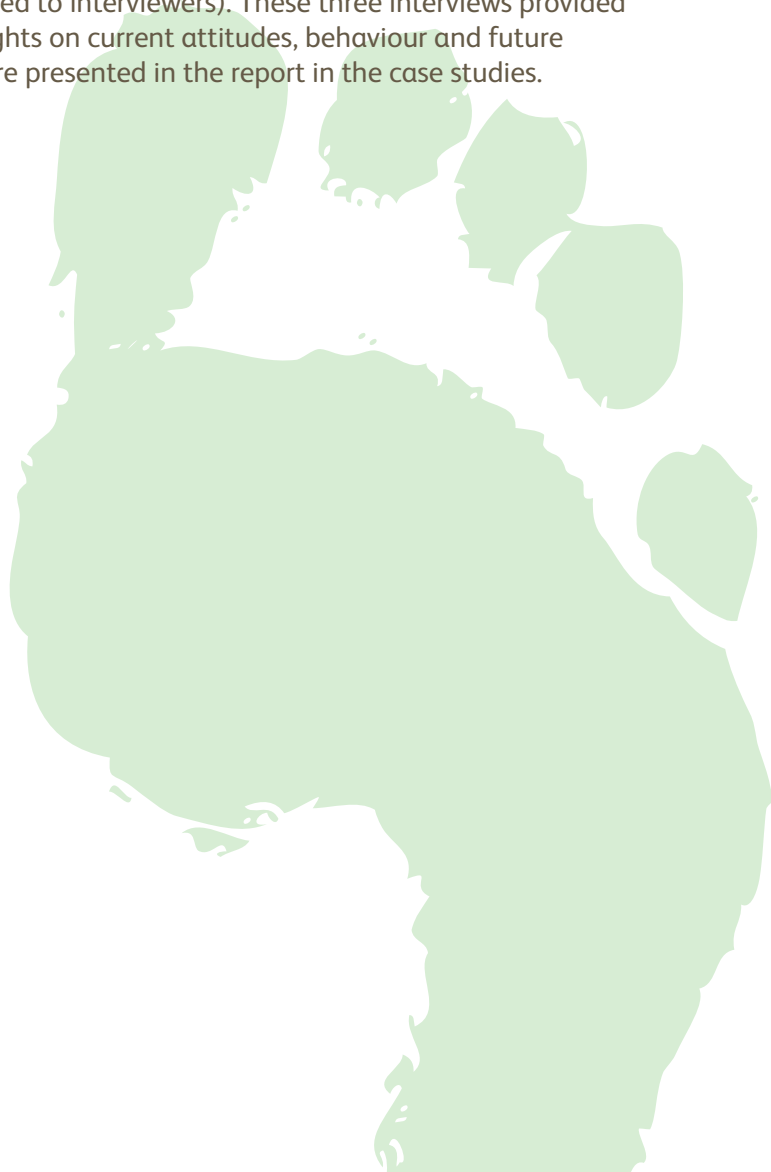
Table 1 – Number of homes in the study by type and region

	East Midlands	Eastern	London	Total
Existing	2	2	3	7
Refurb/Retrofit	2		5	7
New	2	4	3	9
Care & Support			3	3
				26

A variety of schemes and developments were identified by MHP staff to target particular technologies and house types. An initial flyer and accompanying letter announcing the research was sent to target households.

Those who express interest in participating were contacted by the research agency who, in turn, arranged interviews with the appropriate number of respondents. The structured interviews were run in the respondents home and typically lasted about 45 minutes. Each respondent received a £20 shopping voucher as a thank you for their time.

In addition to the structured interview format, three households were selected for a more in-depth interview with a skilled qualitative researcher (as opposed to interviewers). These three interviews provided complementary insights on current attitudes, behaviour and future opportunities, and are presented in the report in the case studies.





FINDINGS

In this study we acknowledge that there are numerous contributing factors that influence what people do in their home in terms of living sustainably and managing their energy consumption. However the responses to the interviews summarized below begin to provide further insight into what influences our customers and what they actually do in relation to energy efficiency and sustainability in their homes.

The Household

Summary:

Overall residents were satisfied with their homes, they were generally rated as comfortable and easy to look after. A high percentage of homes were occupied during the day, which would increase the relevance of energy efficiency in the home. Nearly two-thirds of households are connected to the internet.

- Nine households had been at the property less than a year, whilst 10 had been in the property for more than 5 years.
- There was an average of 2.8 persons per household and an average of 2.5 bedroom per home.
- 77 % of respondents described the property as comfortable and equally were satisfied with the look.
- 81 % of the homes were typically occupied during the day.
- There was a relatively even split across employment status, between employed, unemployed and retired. Likewise there was a broadly even split across age ranges, except under 25's, where there was only one respondent.
- 63 % of households were connected to the internet and 77 % had access to a personal computer in the home.

Case study #1

Existing home

Lived in the property for 6 years. There are 2 adults and 3 children in a two bedroom home.

Household carbon footprint 8.44 tonnes per year (1.68 tonnes per person)

“Overall we like living here – it is our home and it is comfortable in that way. I would love to feel more a part of the community as the majority of our friends live away from here.”

“I want the planet to still be a good place to live in when my children grow up and it’s really important that we all do our bit. If they are to enjoy the world, then we cannot destroy it – it is our responsibility.”

“I am also conscious of saving money – who isn’t?! For example, a couple of years ago I decided to get the gas disconnected. We were spending lots on both gas and electricity but it was a waste. Now we just have electricity and definitely save money – the increase in the electricity bill is much less than the gas bill was.”



Heating the Home

Summary:

It is positive that many households are heating their homes within the recommended temperature range for our homes and are not unnecessarily overheating their homes and wasting energy. Encouragingly homes were described as generally easy to heat and all households had some form of heating controls. Whether respondents were using thermostats or programmers was unclear, however respondents most commonly referred to adjusting the thermostat when describing controlling heat.

Nearly a quarter of homes did not get the desired result through their heating controls, which suggests there is still more to do to support people to understand the use of controls. In the current questions we are unable to determine if respondents are making best use of the controls or programmers to save energy even if they are getting a result that they desired.

One respondent had gone to the lengths to disconnect the gas supply and therefore gas central heating in an effort to better manage the energy bill.

There were no particular issues around stuffiness even in better insulated homes, but in the existing homes there were issues of draughtiness.

With the emergence of new technologies in the home, we expect residents to make a significant leap of understanding that sometimes we as an organization are still grappling with. This study shows that there is still more work to be done to inform customers, even at the most basic level of recognition, before getting onto using them. This is evidenced by the fact that half of homes with low or zero carbon technologies (LZCT) failed to identify them in the interviews. This figure is even higher when looking at new build properties alone.

- The average setting for the heating temperature in the home was 21°C, indeed many set heating within the recommended range of 18-21°C. However there were exceptions and the total range of heating settings ranged from 15°C to 30°C
- All households had some form of heating control, and 90 % felt that they knew how to use them. However, 22 % did not always get the desired result and 12 % described controlling heat in the home as difficult.
- 35 % of respondents felt their property was often or always draughty. These residents were all from existing properties that had not been part of a refurbishment programme.
- There was only one instance of a respondent describing stuffiness of the property being a problem, but overall this did not seem to be an issue.
- One respondent had disconnected the gas supply to the house, assuming that it would be cheaper to heat his home by electricity. Gas central heating would generally be considered a cheaper and greener way to heat a home,
- Half of the households with low or zero carbon technologies did not identify that they had the technology in their home and misunderstood what was fueling their primary source of heat.



Case study #2

Refurbished home

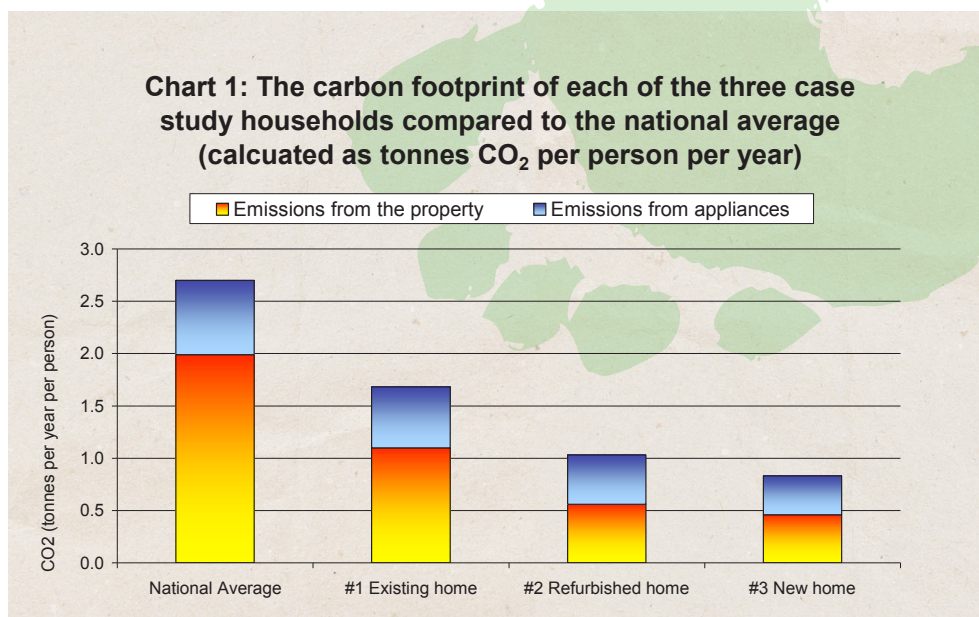
Lived in the property for less than a year, but lived on another property on the estate during the refurbishment. There are 2 adults and 2 children in a two bedroom home.

Household carbon footprint 4.11 tonnes per year (1.03 tonnes per person)

"I love the refurbishment they've done here – it's so much better than my old place where we had really bad damp and silverfish running around. Yes this place is perfect. The double glazing makes a huge difference. There's no damp any more and I haven't had to turn the radiators on at all over the last few months!"

"I'm very involved in the estate as I'm on the resident's committee. I joined up a while ago as I wanted my voice to be heard."

"I'm not quite so proactive when it comes to energy efficiency. I know that I should do things to save energy but I just don't think about it if I'm honest. I do a few things that I've just been taught to do like turn the lights off, shut the window if the heating is on – but that's just from when I was living with my parents."




Energy Saving & Energy Bills

Summary:

The average estimated annual spend on energy in the home was £785 per household. We did not include in this survey a question on whether customers self disconnect, particularly pre-payment customers or if they had a debt/credit on their energy bill. We will consider inclusion of such questions in the next survey.

Over half of households (see table 2) paid for gas and electricity bills by direct debit, although none paid using the cheapest on-line tariffs. Seventeen percent of households paid for electricity bills by pre-payment, and this increases to nearly a quarter as a percentage of those connected to gas. Despite the successful campaign to end unfair premiums for pre-payment customers compared to standard tariffs, these pre-payment customers will still probably be paying more than customers on a direct debit tariff.

In our case-study households, we calculated the carbon footprints of each household (see chart 1). In all three cases the footprint as proportion of the number of occupants was less than the national average of 2.7 tonnes of carbon per person per year. The carbon footprint, taking account of the property and the use of appliances in the home, was smallest for the new build property (0.83 tonnes per person per year), suggesting that the household is realizing some of the invested benefit of our new greener homes.



Furthermore while very few households recognized having received any form of energy advice, a high percentage responded that they took action to save energy. Energy advice came from two main sources, the landlord and energy suppliers. Many did not feel that they needed more energy efficiency advice, although there was wide appreciation for the ease and accessibility of the information presented in MHP's Energy & Money Matters leaflet. There was a low level of recognition of this leaflet, despite wide distribution to households by post and in welcome packs.

Even though nearly half of the respondents had moved into the home in the last two years, none identified having received any information related to the energy performance rating of the home, despite an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) being produced and available for each of these homes. This reinforces the view that EPCs have limited visibility and are not actively considered by new occupiers.

There remains a challenge to determine what ways are the most effective for delivery of information, given the diversity of people's communication preferences. It is clear that the landlord is recognized as an important source. Likewise the rising relevance of digital media is illustrated, with the internet and email cited as the most popular ways of receiving information. There is scope to make better use of this media, while acknowledging that not all households are digitally connected.

MHP continues to promote information to customers on switching energy suppliers to get a better energy price, however there has been very little interest or activity among our customers in the last twelve months. It is an issue recognized in previous reports by the National Housing Federation and is again very clearly represented in the results from this study. Common reasons given for not switching included: prefer the current supplier; don't understand; no reason; and they are all much the same. Only two respondents had switched. One felt the price had gone up with the new supplier and had reverted back to the original supplier.

As details emerge of the Governments plans for a 'Green Deal' to fund energy efficiency improvements to the home, it will be useful to include a question in the next survey on customers understanding and interest in such an offer and paying this back through their energy bill in the future.

Finally, one respondent who had solar photovoltaic panels on their roof was concerned about being unable to claim back funds for the 'spare energy' they are feeding into the national grid. It was clear they felt this was funds due to them. As the feed in tariff gathers profile, it is a message that MHP and housing providers will have to make clear to residents.



- The average estimated annual spend on energy in the home was £785 per household.
- Every household felt that they took action to save energy by turning off lights in empty rooms. Indeed, households are maximizing savings available through lighting with 87 % of all lights in homes being described as low energy lightbulbs.
- Of other energy saving actions, 85 % felt that they make sure windows are closed when heating is on, 81 % only boil water in the kettle that they need, but just 45 % washed clothes at 30oC.
- Only five households had received any advice on the energy performance of the home or had received some form of energy advice.
- Most respondents did not consider that they got advice and support around energy and money matters, but of those that did landlord/ support worker were evidently a main source of this kind of information.
- If they needed information, most commonly cited they would ask or contact their landlord (24), following by asking friends/family (17) and using the internet (14).
- Asked if they would like further information, most that responded (11) said they did not need it or are happy with what they get, but three specifically requested further information about using the heating system.
- The MHP visual language ‘energy and money matters’ leaflet was highly commended by many respondents and deemed useful and easy to access.
- Although this leaflet was sent to every MHP household in January 2009, and is included in the welcome back of every new home, it was only recognized as having been seen before by 7 households. Most stated they had never seen it before, but felt it would have been very useful.
- There was virtually no energy supplier switching to get better energy prices. Only 1 household had changed their energy supplier in the last 12 months to achieve financial savings. There is a strong sense that it is either not worth it or that people trust their current supplier.
- When asked about ways in which they would like to be contacted with helpful information specifically about their house, respondents cited emails and the internet as the two most popular, followed by receiving information face to face.

Table 2 – Percentage of households utility bill payment method

	Gas	Electricity
Pre-pay meter	23 %	17 %
Monthly	15 %	13 %
Quarterly	8 %	21 %
Direct Debit	54 %	50 %
Online	0 %	0 %



MHP Energy & Money Matters Leaflet

There are broadly recognized issues with the limitations of leaflets. It is very easy for customers to dismiss leaflets as 'junk mail' or irrelevant. This is clearly the case given the recognition level for this leaflet, which had been sent to all residents. However on closer inspection the Energy & Money Matters leaflet was very well received by nearly all residents and the visual element genuinely regarded as adding to the interest and impact vs. 'classic' leafleting. The following are some additional comments for MHP to reflect on regarding future changes to this and other leaflets.

- The balance between saving money and saving energy is well pitched. It gives the impression that it is something to genuinely help residents, not a lecture on how to live in their homes.
- Whilst the visual imagery speaks for itself and is powerful tool for encouraging people to read the leaflet, there was some concern about the text heavy section as this is the second thing seen.
- It was felt that the front cover was 'a little dry' and gives the impression of being 'just another leaflet'. It was suggested that perhaps a more exciting / enticing front cover could help people to pick it up and read it, rather than glance at it and throw away.
- The text information was criticised for not being cohesive, but acknowledged that it worked better after having seen the visuals. It was also noted that there are currently two 'jumps' residents have to make before they get to the visuals, which is the best and most informative part of the leaflet.



Perceptions of Climate Change

Summary:

Similarly to the views expressed last year when MHP sought feedback from customers on our sustainability strategy, there is a high level of awareness of climate change and a firm commitment to take action. In this sample nearly two thirds agreed with the statement that climate change is a threat to our future. There is less agreement with the likelihood that it will impact on life in the UK. This might indicate a view towards a reduced need to take action, but on the contrary 88 % of households felt they had an individual responsibility to take action. This is further supported by responses to the question of what best describes what influences their approach to energy consumption and sustainability in the home. Whilst unsurprisingly cost was important, wanting to make a difference and do ones bit, were both more commonly selected.

- 62 % of households felt that climate change was a threat to our future. Fifteen percent disagreed and the remainder were unsure.
- The percentage of households that believed it would impact on their life in the UK was less, just 42 %.
- 88 % of households felt that they had an individual responsibility to take action on climate change.
- Business and Government were cited by all but one respondent as having a responsibility to take action.
- There are two main motivators for energy efficiency saving money & doing ones bit. Wanting to do my bit (65 %) and wanting to make a difference (65 %), were both more commonly cited than saving money (62 %) as factors influencing action on energy consumption and sustainability.
- Half of respondents cited worries about the future as an influence prompting action on sustainability.
- Responses to what might encourage or inspire one to take action in the future included:
 - “If we had same amount of info as the pizza leaflet through the letter box”
 - “It must be pretty difficult to find a planet like ours”
 - “The well being of my family”

The Local Community

Summary:

It has already been described that respondents had indicated that they saw the landlord as an important source of information. The role of housing associations as a an important stakeholder in providing information on this agenda is reinforced in the responses of all but two respondents who felt that the landlord acted in their best interest.

Responses reflect strong local connections, a willingness to help each other out and a positive view of the local area, including local services. However there is evidence of anti social behavior (ASB), including two instances where it was felt that it was a significant problem.

- 92 % of respondents described that they trusted their landlord to act in their best interest.
- 81 % of respondents felt that their neighbours were willing to help each other out. Only 12 % felt neighbours were not willing to help each other out at all.
- Half of respondents said that most of their friends lived in the local area.
- Over a quarter of respondents were involved in some form of local community group or action.
- There were generally high levels of satisfaction with local facilities such as the doctors surgery, local shops, recycling facilities and public transport.
- 46 % felt that there was some ASB in their area, but only 8 % described it as a major problem. It is noted this is from a small sample and differs from the results of MHP's national ASB local perception survey, where 65 % of respondents were either fairly or very concerned about ASB in their area.

Case study #3

New home

Lived in the property for less than a year. There are 2 adults and 3 children in a four bedroom home.

Household carbon footprint 4.12 tonnes per year (0.83 tonnes per person)

“I really like living here – it is very modern and spacious. It’s fantastic to live in such a development and is well placed for the shops and travel links nearby. The benefits for the children are great – they didn’t have their own bedrooms in our last house so this gives us all more privacy, even though we don’t have the garden anymore.”

“I do think it’s important that we are an energy efficient household. Of course it is important for us to contribute to keeping the wider environment in good shape, but for me saving money goes hand in hand with this as it’s equally important in my life.”

“It’s difficult to make energy efficiency a priority when I work most days and have a big family to look after.”



CONCLUSIONS

This study supports the view that customers have a common sense approach to energy efficiency and a strong interest and commitment to their local area. Responses reflect a range of views and therefore offer good insight to MHP and the sector more generally. The conclusions are drawn together within three themes, improving communication, understanding low & zero carbon technologies and awareness of energy consumption.

Overall our customers were comfortable and satisfied with the homes that we provide for them, but that there is scope for improvement, particularly around the information we provide. For example, there was interest in further information on heating controls, suggested improvements to our fuel poverty leaflet and evidence of a lack of understanding of new installed technologies. Beyond this, importantly there is also a lack of access to and awareness of the amount of energy consumed.

Improving Communication

Finding appropriate and meaningful ways to share relevant information with residents remains a perennial issue. It is easy for customers to dismiss leaflets as junk mail or irrelevant, however it is clear that Energy & Money matters is a good model for engaging and sharing information. There were further suggestions about how MHP could improve communication around energy and related issues.

- It is recognised that the visual element of the energy leaflet was felt to genuinely add to the interest and impact vs. 'classic' leafleting. It was also credited with helping to overcome an issue about 'not being lectured to on how to live in their homes'.
- Delivering face to face energy advice is effective, but presents practical challenges. MHP's project with gas servicing operatives, who are required to share information with customers in the home at gas safety check visits, should be more explicitly reviewed in future iterations of the survey.
- There is clear interest to receive information digitally, for example by email. MHP should explore the opportunity to engage customers with email communications on energy related matters. We can make better use of digital media, but acknowledging that it is not inclusive for all our customers.

- The partnership with Which? and the Energy Saving Trust were welcomed and suggests that customers value such mutually beneficial associations.
- There is very little evidence of customers switching to get a better energy deal. However we feel it is still important to make that option available and to promote the benefits to customers.

Understanding Low & Zero Carbon Technologies

MHP has already begun to challenge the way it relays information on new technologies to customers when they move into new homes. We have started to implement changes, but there is a significant step change that we are asking customers to make, and the evidence here, where half failed to identify the technology in their home, is that there is more we still need to do to ensure recognition and effective use of low and zero carbon technologies in the home.

- Customers would be very happy to have visits to reiterate how to use everything in the most efficient way after the initial introduction i.e. once they have had time to settle in and can focus more on the way everything works.
- MHP should continue to monitor how this approach is working where it has implemented this in its recently completed scheme in London (Alexia Square).
- There is also a need for MHP to test that staff have sufficient knowledge of the systems to meaningfully and accurately share that with customers.
- Customers would like to understand rights and responsibilities relating to the new solar photovoltaic feed in tariff and who has the right to that income.

Raising Energy Consumption Awareness

There is a generally high awareness of actions customers can take to save energy and money, supported by a relatively high level of motivation to take action based around wanting to do their bit and saving money. However it is evident that customers have low levels of knowledge about the expected energy performance of their home or indeed how much energy they are using.

- Customers could be better informed about the expected energy performance of their home against which they can compare their energy bills or pre-payments.
- MHP should continue to explore how it can engage with the roll-out of smart meter by utility companies for the benefit of our customers.
- MHP should examine if there is any form of benchmarking of household energy usage that we can make practically available to customers, enabling them to compare in a more immediate and accessible format their energy consumption against similar types of properties and households.

Throughout the study there is a strong sense that the landlord is a trusted and expected source of information and this reinforces the importance of our role in filtering and providing concise and relevant information to support our customers make best use of their homes and maximize energy efficiency savings.

Acknowledgements

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This report was written and researched by Matthew Bush, Sustainability Manager, Metropolitan Housing Partnership.

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